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Resistance in Dystopian Literature: 1984 and Beyond

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Introduction

Throughout history, some of the most important changes have come from everyday people who chose to question and stand up to unfair systems rather than accept them. When we teach dystopian literature, we encourage students to look beyond the stories and consider real issues such as power, freedom, truth, and moral responsibility. Books like *1984* may seem far from our own lives at first, but they help us understand real problems such as tyranny, propaganda, censorship, surveillance, and the loss of civil rights. By exploring these themes in both fiction and nonfiction, students learn how authoritarian systems develop, how people react to oppression, and why it is important to resist in order to protect truth and dignity. When we read George Orwell's *1984* alongside nonfiction, history, memoirs, poetry, and other dystopian stories, students can see different perspectives on resistance and oppression and consider what people should do when faced with injustice. This unit shows that the questions raised by dystopian literature are not just about made-up worlds; they help us understand history, make sense of today's world, and take part in our democracy. In the end, students will consider what it means to recognize injustice, stand up against oppression, and maintain their humanity when faced with authoritarian power. The real value of dystopian literature is not in guessing the future, but in inspiring students to help shape it.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

This curriculum unit is for my twelfth-grade English IV students at South Anchorage High School in Anchorage, Alaska. South is one of the largest and most diverse schools in the Anchorage School District, with about 1,400 students from many different backgrounds. The school values academic success, extracurricular activities, and community involvement, creating an environment where students are encouraged to think critically, work together, and make a positive impact.

Teaching Literature Through Inquiry

I believe that teaching literature should go beyond just understanding the plot or spotting literary devices.

Literature gives students a chance to explore important human questions, challenge their own ideas, and learn more about themselves and their communities. In my classroom, I aim to create a space where students not only analyze texts but also take part in meaningful discussions, support their ideas with evidence, and stay open to new perspectives.

This philosophy guides how I designed this curriculum unit. Instead of reading *1984* on its own, students will explore bigger ideas like tyranny, resistance, truth, individuality, and moral responsibility through a carefully chosen mix of literature and nonfiction. By reading different genres, such as political philosophy, historical nonfiction, memoir, poetry, and dystopian fiction, students learn to connect ideas across texts. This approach helps them see common themes in history and literature and build strong analytical skills for making their own arguments.

A key part of this philosophy is realizing that resistance does not always mean open rebellion. In this unit, students will see that resistance can mean protecting the truth, standing up to injustice, refusing to go along with wrongdoing, keeping your humanity, or just thinking for yourself when everyone else is following the crowd. By looking at these different forms of resistance, students learn that literature helps us understand not only made-up worlds but also the real ethical choices people face in their own lives and communities.

Framing the Inquiry: Tyranny, Resistance, and Human Agency

Dystopian literature is more than just stories about imagined futures. It gives students a way to think about important questions like power, freedom, truth, and moral responsibility. Books like George Orwell's *1984* may be set in fictional worlds, but they help us understand real issues such as tyranny, propaganda, censorship, surveillance, and the loss of civil liberties. By studying these themes, students learn how authoritarian systems develop, how people react to oppression, and why standing up for truth and dignity matters.

Although dystopian stories often highlight oppressive governments, this unit is really about exploring resistance. Instead of seeing resistance only as a political revolution, students look at the many ways people respond to injustice. In these texts, resistance can mean small acts of individuality, standing by your beliefs, keeping memories alive, thinking for yourself, and questioning those in power. Students are encouraged to think about why people resist and what happens when they act, stay silent, or go along with injustice.

The unit starts by making sure everyone understands key ideas like tyranny, totalitarianism, propaganda, censorship, surveillance, utilitarianism, and resistance. We do this through short lessons and by reading an excerpt from Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. These readings give students the background and vocabulary they need to tackle more complex texts later in the unit.

Next, students read Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian," which shows resistance as one person's quiet choice not to conform in a tightly controlled society. Then, Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" asks students to think about moral complicity and whether refusing to benefit from injustice is a form of resistance. These stories help prepare students for a deeper study of George Orwell's *1984*, where Winston Smith's fight to keep truth, memory, and individuality becomes the main way we look at power and the human need for freedom.

After reading the novel, students go further by reading an excerpt from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and Martin Niemöller's poem "First They Came." These works link Orwell's warnings in fiction to real historical experiences with totalitarianism, dehumanization, and the tragic results of staying silent when faced with injustice.

Each week, students write Literary Response Journals where they analyze literary elements and compare themes from different texts. Small group discussions also give students a chance to share their ideas and use evidence to support their interpretations.

At the end of the unit, students write a braided analytical essay where they bring together ideas from *1984* and the other texts to create their own argument about tyranny, resistance, and the moral responsibilities of people living under oppressive systems. Instead of looking at each work separately, students combine literature, philosophy, memoir, poetry, and nonfiction into one analysis, showing how different viewpoints help us better understand authoritarianism, resistance, and human agency.

In the end, this curriculum aims to help students see dystopian literature as more than just stories about the future. It encourages them to realize that these books ask important questions about truth, justice, freedom, and moral responsibility; questions that still matter today. No matter where my students go after high school, I hope they leave this unit curious, thoughtful, and aware of their role in society. I want them to recognize injustice, think carefully about different ideas, and understand that resistance is not always rebellion. Sometimes, it starts with the courage to protect the truth, question authority, and stay true to themselves even when facing oppression.

Unit Content

This nine-week unit explores tyranny, resistance, and moral responsibility by studying George Orwell's *1984* along with a set of related texts. At the start, students look at their roles and responsibilities as U.S. citizens. They then build a historical and conceptual background using excerpts from *Civil Disobedience*, *On Tyranny*, and the Bill of Rights. Each week, students write Literary Response Journals that connect *1984* with other works, such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The Pedestrian," "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," *Night*, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "First They Came," and selected nonfiction. Students also practice annotation, close reading, and take part in class discussions. At the end of the unit, they write an analytical essay that brings together themes from several texts, showing how literature and nonfiction help them better understand tyranny, resistance, and human agency.

Analysis of George Orwell's *1984*

George Orwell's *1984* is the main focus of this curriculum unit. It encourages students to look closely at how authoritarian governments gain and keep power, and how people react when truth, freedom, and identity are threatened. Instead of seeing the novel only as a warning about a distant future, the curriculum treats it as an ongoing commentary on tyranny, propaganda, surveillance, censorship, and moral responsibility. Winston Smith's small acts of defiance, like buying the diary, writing "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER,"¹ holding onto memories, and building a relationship with Julia, show that resistance often starts with the decision to think for oneself. These examples help students see that resistance is not always open rebellion. Often, it begins with protecting truth, individuality, and human dignity in societies that demand total conformity.

Before reading *1984*, students build a foundation by studying excerpts from Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the Bill of Rights. This order gives students the background and vocabulary they need to spot how authoritarian control

works in Orwell's novel. For example, when they read about the Ministry of Truth, students can connect its rewriting of history to Arendt's ideas about how totalitarian regimes change reality. Winston's fear of the Thought Police and the constant telescreens also lead students to think again about the rights discussed in the Bill of Rights, sparking conversations about the loss of privacy, free speech, and due process under oppressive governments. These connections help students see *1984* as part of a larger conversation about power and individual freedom, not just as a standalone story.

As students read the novel, they regularly connect Orwell's themes with those from the other texts through weekly journals, annotations, and small group discussions. Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" gives students an early chance to compare Leonard Mead's solitary walks with Winston's growing discomfort with conformity. Leonard's resistance is quiet, while Winston's becomes more deliberate, but both show that simply thinking or acting differently can challenge authoritarian systems. Later, students compare Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" with Part II of *1984*, looking at how both stories make readers think about moral responsibility in unfair societies. Just as the people who leave Omelas refuse to accept a society built on one child's suffering, Winston tries to reject a system based on fear, lies, and the suppression of independent thought. These comparisons help students see that resistance often starts with refusing to accept injustice.

The end of *1984* leads to one of the unit's most challenging discussions. Winston's betrayal of Julia in Room 101 and his surrender to the Party make students rethink what courage and resistance really mean. Rather than seeing Winston's loss as proof that resistance is pointless, students look at how authoritarian systems use psychological power and consider Orwell's ideas about fear, identity, and resilience. By connecting the novel's ending with Martin Niemöller's "First They Came" and parts of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, students take the discussion beyond fiction. Niemöller's poem shows the dangers of staying silent, and Frankl's thoughts on finding meaning during suffering show that resistance can continue even without physical freedom. Together, these texts help students see that holding onto one's humanity is a powerful form of resistance.

Throughout the unit, students keep coming back to the main questions from their first writing assignment: What responsibilities come with individual rights? When should people question authority? What forms can resistance take? By reading closely, discussing together, writing weekly journals, and finishing with a braided essay, students build a deeper understanding of tyranny and resistance in literature, history, and today. In the end, *1984* is more than just the main text. It ties all the readings together and shows how literature helps us explore the lasting connections between power, truth, freedom, and moral responsibility.

Analysis of Introductory Articles: "On Tyranny", "Civil Disobedience", and the Bill of Rights

Before reading *1984*, students build a foundation for the unit's main themes by looking at how individual rights, civic responsibility, and resistance connect. Instead of starting with Orwell's world alone, the unit first asks students to think about the freedoms protected in a democracy and the responsibilities that come with them. By analyzing the Bill of Rights, parts of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, and the beginning of Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, students gain the background and vocabulary they need to spot how authoritarianism slowly develops in *1984*. These readings help students see resistance not just as a political revolution but as the daily responsibility to question injustice, protect truth, and take part in civic life.

The unit starts by looking at the Bill of Rights, encouraging students to think about why these protections exist instead of just memorizing them. Students work together to put assigned amendments into modern language, then imagine how the Party in *1984* might change or remove those rights under an authoritarian government. As they talk about freedoms like speech, privacy, due process, and protection from cruel punishment,

students start to see that tyranny often grows as rights slowly fade away, not all at once. Before beginning the novel, students are introduced to George Orwell's historical context, including his criticism of Joseph Stalin's totalitarian regime and how his disillusionment with the Soviet Union inspired both *Animal Farm* and *1984* as warnings about the dangers of propaganda, political oppression, and the manipulation of truth. This activity gives students a useful way to read *1984*, helping them recognize that Winston Smith's world reflects Orwell's broader warning about totalitarian governments and is shaped not just by what the Party controls, but by the freedoms that have disappeared.

Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* adds to the discussion by shifting the focus from rights to responsibility. When students examine Thoreau's argument that individuals should not allow governments to overrule their consciences, they begin considering when obedience becomes complicity and when resistance becomes a moral obligation. Thoreau's assertion that citizens should not "resign their consciences to the legislator" raises a question that echoes throughout the unit: What responsibilities do individuals have when confronted with injustice? At the same time, students also consider the limits of Thoreau's philosophy, recognizing that acts of conscience often carry significant personal consequences and that resistance is not always straightforward or successful. They discuss whether individual acts of dissent are sufficient to challenge oppressive systems or whether broader collective action is necessary to create meaningful change. Students revisit these questions as Winston quietly questions the Party's version of reality, Leonard Mead refuses to conform in "The Pedestrian," and the citizens who walk away from Omelas reject a society built upon suffering. Thoreau's essay therefore provides students with a philosophical framework for examining both the possibilities and the complexities of resistance before they encounter its literary representations.

Next, students read Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, focusing on the "Prologue: History and Tyranny" and Chapter 1, "Do Not Obey in Advance."² Snyder says that authoritarian governments often succeed because regular people change their behavior on their own, before anyone forces them to. Students usually notice connections between Snyder's warning and the societies they study later in the unit. His point that "most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given"³ helps students see *1984* in a new way, where Party members change how they speak, hide their thoughts, and follow rules without being told. Instead of seeing Winston's resistance as just brave moments, students start to see that authoritarian systems rely on people's willingness to obey, not just on fear and punishment.

These first readings give students the background they need for the rest of the unit. They start by looking at the rights people have in democracies, then think about the responsibilities citizens have to protect those rights, and finally see how authoritarian systems depend on silence, conformity, and blind obedience. This order helps students gain the knowledge and perspective they need to understand *1984* and the other texts in the unit. Most importantly, it shows that resistance is not always about rebellion; it often starts with choosing to think for yourself, keep your conscience, and not give up your moral responsibility when faced with injustice.

Analysis of "Origins of Totalitarianism" by Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* gives students the historical and philosophical background they need to understand the power structures introduced in the opening chapters of *1984*. Students read and analyze Chapter 13, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," using Arendt's examination of totalitarianism to explore how authoritarian governments consolidate power through propaganda, the manipulation of truth, the cultivation of fear, and the suppression of independent thought. Rather than viewing Orwell's novel as simply a work of speculative fiction, students use Arendt's ideas to recognize that

Oceania reflects patterns found in real historical regimes. Reading Arendt alongside Part I, Chapters 1–4 of *1984* allows students to identify these connections as they emerge in the novel, deepening their understanding of the Party's methods of control.⁴ By establishing this historical foundation before students progress through the novel, they come to recognize that tyranny rarely appears suddenly; instead, it develops gradually as governments gain control over information, public discourse, and individual freedoms.

While annotating the excerpt, students notice that Arendt explains how totalitarian governments want more than just political power; they also want to change reality itself. Students often link this idea to Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth, where he changes historical records so the Party always looks perfect. Winston realizes that the past can be changed and that "who controls the past controls the future."⁵ This idea becomes clearer when students compare it with Arendt's points about propaganda and the twisting of the truth. Reading both texts together helps students consider why authoritarian governments view the truth as dangerous and how controlling history helps them maintain power.

Arendt also helps students understand how fear and isolation help keep authoritarian systems in place. As Winston moves carefully through a world in which even private thoughts can be crimes, students see that the Party's main power comes not just from watching people, but from breaking trust between them. This idea connects to earlier discussions about the Bill of Rights, *Civil Disobedience*, and *On Tyranny*, showing that authoritarianism relies on people being alone, afraid, and unwilling to challenge those in charge.

After annotating, students bring together Arendt's ideas and Part I of *1984* in their first Literary Response Journal. They look at how Orwell turns political theory into Winston Smith's daily life. By reading historical nonfiction with dystopian fiction, students go beyond just spotting literary techniques. They start to see how literature shows real questions about power, truth, and resistance. Arendt's work gives students the words and ideas they need for the rest of the unit and helps them see that resistance often starts by noticing how authoritarian systems try to control people and society.

Analysis of Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" and Part I of 1984

Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" helps students explore themes they will see again in *1984*, such as surveillance, conformity, individuality, and quiet resistance. Bradbury's story takes place in a typical American city, not Orwell's Oceania, but both societies make it hard for people to think for themselves and expect everyone to fit in. At first, Leonard Mead's nightly walks seem unimportant. As the story goes on, though, Bradbury shows that simply walking, noticing his surroundings, and thinking on his own have become acts of quiet defiance. Leonard does not protest or try to change the system. Instead, he keeps his individuality through an ordinary habit, showing that resistance does not always mean open rebellion. For enrichment, students could read parts of Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking,"⁶ which describes walking as a way to step away from society's expectations and find more freedom to think. Reading Thoreau alongside Bradbury can help students see why walking matters in both works and how Leonard's walks stand for independence, reflection, and personal freedom in a world that discourages all three.

Students read "The Pedestrian" along with the second half of Part I of *1984*, where Winston Smith becomes more aware of the Party's constant surveillance and control. Bradbury shows this early on by describing a city where "not one light in all the houses"⁷ shows any sign of life, and families stay inside watching television. Leonard notices that the empty streets look like a graveyard, which creates an uneasy feeling before the police car appears.⁸ In a similar way, Orwell creates a sense of fear in Oceania with the ever-present telescreens and the warning that "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU."⁹ While Bradbury's characters choose to

isolate themselves with technology and Orwell's characters are watched by the government, both authors show that freedom fades when people stop thinking for themselves and just follow along.

As students read the story, they look at how Bradbury uses setting, symbolism, and characters to show how normal actions can become crimes in strict societies. Leonard's habit of walking alone at night sets him apart, but Bradbury does not make him a hero or a rebel.¹⁰ Instead, Leonard's curiosity, love of nature, and enjoyment of being alone are what make him seem suspicious. When the police car asks, "What are you doing out?"¹¹ students often see that this question shows how society thinks: walking for no reason is now strange. This is similar to Winston's quiet acts of resistance in *1984*, like buying a diary,¹² writing his thoughts,¹³ and exploring the prole district to find real human experiences.¹⁴ In both stories, simple actions become risky because they protect individuality in a world that demands sameness.

Bradbury also lets students see how surveillance is not just about watching people, but also about changing how they act. Leonard has not broken any laws, but the police car suspects him just because he is different. In the same way, Orwell shows that the Party wants to control not just actions but also thoughts, through the idea of Thoughtcrime.¹⁵ Winston learns that even a look or a small movement can show disloyalty, which means that strict governments rely on people watching themselves and each other. By looking at these examples, students see that tyranny lasts not just because of force, but also because of fear, habits, and people slowly accepting conformity as normal.

After making notes on the stories, students connect Bradbury's story with *1984* in their weekly Literary Response Journal. They look at how each author shows the link between surveillance and resistance. Leonard Mead keeps taking his evening walks,¹⁶ and Winston Smith secretly holds on to his memories and questions what the Party says is true. Both characters show that the first step in resisting is choosing to stay true to yourself in a society that expects total obedience. By comparing these stories, students better understand the main questions of the unit and see that simple acts of individuality, like walking or writing in a diary, can be powerful forms of resistance when freedom is at risk.

Analysis of “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. LeGuin and Part II of *1984*

Ursula K. Le Guin's “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” encourages students to look beyond how authoritarian societies keep control and instead think about what individuals should do when they see injustice. Unlike *1984* or “The Pedestrian,” Le Guin's story does not show a harsh government or a clear dictator. Instead, the people of Omelas accept a society that relies on the lifelong suffering of one neglected child.¹⁷ This disturbing idea pushes students to consider a key question: What should people do when they realize that a society's success depends on injustice? The people who leave Omelas do not try to overthrow the system, but by refusing to take part, they show that resistance does not always mean rebellion. Sometimes, it starts with having the courage to say no to wrongdoing.

Students read Le Guin's story alongside Part II of *1984*, where Winston Smith's growing awareness of the Party's deception transforms his quiet dissatisfaction into a conscious rejection of its authority. As Winston recalls fragmented memories of his childhood and increasingly questions the Party's manipulation of history, he realizes that “the Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears.”¹⁸ Students often recognize this moment as a turning point because Winston understands that preserving truth itself has become an act of resistance. In a similar way, the citizens of Omelas cannot claim ignorance once they have seen the imprisoned child.¹⁹ Le Guin ensures that every citizen must witness the child's suffering, eliminating the

possibility of innocent indifference. The story also introduces students to an important ethical principle associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant: human beings should never be treated merely as a means to an end but always as ends in themselves.²⁰ Omelas violates this principle because the happiness and prosperity of an entire society depend upon reducing one child to a tool for everyone else's benefit. This ethical dilemma differs from Orwell's critique of totalitarianism. While *1984* explores how authoritarian governments manipulate truth and compel obedience through surveillance, propaganda, and fear, Le Guin asks whether individuals bear moral responsibility when they knowingly benefit from an unjust system. Most citizens of Omelas return to their comfortable lives despite what they have witnessed, while a few quietly walk away, suggesting that once injustice is fully understood, individuals must ultimately choose between complicity and conscience.²¹

As students make notes on the story, they look at how Le Guin creates moral uncertainty through her storytelling. At first, Omelas seems like a perfect place, full of music, celebration, and happiness, but then the story suddenly reveals the dark truth behind this happiness. This sharp contrast helps students see how appearances can be misleading and how societies can hide injustice behind promises of stability or happiness. Orwell uses a similar approach in Part II of *1984*. Winston finds hope in his relationship with Julia and his memories, but at the same time, he becomes more aware that the Party keeps its power through fear, lies, and destroying the truth. In both stories, students learn that to recognize injustice, they need to look past what society tells them and question what is considered normal.

Le Guin's choice not to explain what happens to those who leave Omelas adds more to class discussions. Students often wonder where these people go or if their leaving makes any difference, but the author does not give those answers. Instead, leaving becomes a symbol of choosing what is right over what is easy, even if it might not change anything. Winston's story brings up similar ideas. He wants to believe that "if there is hope, it lies in the proles,"²² but he also knows that real resistance starts with the courage to reject the Party's lies, even if it seems hopeless. By looking at these moments, students think about the difference between changing a system and staying true to their values. The conversation often comes back to the main idea that resistance usually starts before any big change. It begins when people decide to see injustice, protect the truth, and refuse to accept oppression as normal.

After making their notes, students bring together ideas from Le Guin's story and Part II of *1984* in their weekly Literary Response Journal. They look at how both authors show the link between moral choices and resistance. The people who leave Omelas quietly reject a society based on suffering, while Winston tries to keep his memory, conscience, and humanity against the Party's constant control. Both stories suggest that the first and most important act of resistance is refusing to take part in injustice just because it is normal. By comparing these stories, students see that literature not only shows how tyranny works but also asks readers to think about their own moral responsibilities in society.

Analysis of "Man's Search for Meaning," "First They Came," and Part III of *1984*

In the last weeks of the unit, students revisit the idea of resistance by reading Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and Martin Niemöller's poem "First They Came." Alongside Part III of *1984*, these works push students to think about what happens when oppression reaches its peak. Instead of focusing on how authoritarian governments take power, students now look at what is left of a person when freedom, dignity, and hope seem lost. These texts show that even when oppressive systems control people's bodies, holding on to humanity, conscience, and moral purpose can be a powerful form of resistance.

Students start by reading Frankl's story of the death march, where exhaustion and suffering threaten to erase personal identity.²³ Instead of focusing only on the harshness of the march, Frankl talks about the need to keep hope and find meaning, even in situations meant to break the human spirit. He thinks about his wife and the inner life that no captor can truly take away.²⁴ Students see that Frankl resists not by escaping, but by holding on to who he is. This stands in sharp contrast to Winston Smith in Part III of *1984*. While Winston is imprisoned in the Ministry of Love, he tries to stay loyal to Julia and keep his hatred for the Party, but O'Brien slowly breaks down his memories, beliefs, and sense of self.²⁵ By looking at both stories, students ask: What parts of human identity can authoritarian systems control, and what, if anything, is beyond their reach?

Martin Niemöller's "First They Came" expands the discussion by moving from personal survival to shared responsibility. The poem repeats the phrase "First they came..."²⁶ to show how oppression grows when people stay silent in the face of injustice. Students look at how Niemöller's use of repetition, his shift to a more personal view, and his final realization highlight the dangers of doing nothing. The last line, "Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me,"²⁷ is often one of the most memorable parts of the unit because it shows what happens when people are indifferent. This connects to *1984*, where the Party keeps people apart so real resistance is almost impossible. Winston's thought that "if there is hope, it lies in the proles"²⁸ shows he knows resistance needs people to work together, but the Party destroys trust and community, making that hope impossible.

As students bring these texts together, they see that Frankl, Niemöller, and Orwell each have a unique view on tyranny and resistance. Orwell shows how authoritarian governments try to control thoughts and identity. Frankl shows that meaning and inner strength can survive even in the worst situations. Niemöller reminds us that the chance to resist often comes before tyranny is at its worst. Again, these works help students rethink the idea that resistance is always rebellion. Sometimes, resistance means keeping your humanity, holding on to your values, speaking up for others, or refusing to stay silent when injustice starts.

After finishing *1984*, students use these texts in their final Literary Response Journal and then in their last braided essay. By looking at Winston's surrender, Frankl's effort to keep meaning, and Niemöller's warning about being passive, students build stronger arguments about power, conscience, and human choice. The unit ends not by asking if tyranny can always be stopped, but by encouraging students to think about a deeper question: What duties do people have to protect truth, dignity, and humanity when facing injustice? Through this final step, students see that the strongest forms of resistance often start long before open rebellion. They begin with the choice to remember, to question, to speak up, and to stay fully human.

Teaching Strategies

Annotations: Gathering the Threads

In this unit, students annotate short stories such as "The Pedestrian" and "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" to develop the close reading skills they will later apply to *1984*. Because many students are unfamiliar with annotation as an analytical strategy, instruction begins with explicit teacher modeling. Using a brief passage projected for the class, I model how to read slowly and think aloud while annotating, demonstrating how to underline significant passages, circle unfamiliar or repeated words, identify symbols and figurative language, note shifts in tone or perspective, and write brief margin notes that explain why a

particular detail is important. Rather than simply marking interesting lines, students are encouraged to ask questions, make predictions, identify emerging themes, connect passages to earlier readings, and record moments that reveal characterization, conflict, or an author's purpose. To support consistency, students use a common set of annotation prompts, including: What stands out? What does this reveal about power, truth, or human nature? What questions does this passage raise? How does this connect to the unit's essential understanding that resistance is not always rebellion?

Following the teacher model, students annotate a second passage collaboratively before independently applying the strategy to the remainder of the text. Small-group discussions provide opportunities for students to compare annotations, defend their interpretations with textual evidence, and recognize that effective annotation is less about finding a single "correct" answer than about documenting thoughtful engagement with the text. Throughout the unit, annotations become increasingly purposeful as students gather evidence for Literary Response Journals, in-class discussions, and the culminating braided essay. For example, while reading "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," students might annotate passages that reveal how the citizens rationalize the suffering of the child, connect those moments to questions of moral responsibility, and consider how Le Guin challenges readers to confront complicity. In "The Pedestrian," students may identify descriptions of Leonard Mead's solitary walks, the empty streets, and the police car to analyze how Bradbury portrays conformity and quiet resistance. By repeatedly practicing these strategies across increasingly complex texts, students develop the habits of close reading necessary to recognize how authors use language, symbolism, structure, and characterization to develop larger ideas before applying those same analytical skills to *1984*.

Literary Response Journals: Weaving Connections

To encourage real student thinking, limit screen time, and check their understanding of the unit's main ideas, my students will write a Literary Response Journal (LRJ) every Friday during the full class period. These handwritten, in-class journals give students a regular chance to bring together what they've read that week and connect the themes from the extra texts to the matching part of *1984*. Over the unit, students will write four journals: In Week 3, they will pair Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with Part I of *1984* to look at how authoritarian systems start. In Week 4, they will connect Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" to the rest of Part I by exploring surveillance, conformity, and individuality. In Week 5, they will compare Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" with Part II of *1984*, asking how both texts show resistance through moral choices and personal conscience. In Week 6, they will finish the novel by pairing Martin Niemöller's *First They Came* and parts of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* with Part III of *1984* to discuss silence, resilience, and keeping humanity under oppression. Students should use evidence from both texts and focus on making thematic connections, not just summarizing the plot. For example, when comparing "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" with Part II of *1984*, students might look at how the citizens who leave Omelas and Winston Smith both reject unjust systems, showing that resistance is not always open rebellion but can start with refusing to accept moral wrongdoing. These weekly journals help students get better at connecting ideas across texts and build the skills they need for their essay.

Thesis Development: Plaiting an Argument

In this unit, students will work on writing analytical thesis statements to prepare for their weekly Literary Response Journals and, later, a braided essay. Using a clear thesis formula, they will practice identifying an author's tone, looking at how literary or rhetorical devices shape main ideas, and explaining how these choices support the author's purpose. This will be especially important as they connect their analysis to the

unit's themes, such as tyranny, resistance, truth, individuality, and moral responsibility. By comparing *1984* with other texts from the unit, students will get better at making thoughtful, evidence-based claims that focus on deeper analysis instead of just summarizing. Regular practice will give students a dependable way to approach literary analysis and help them feel more confident in building their own arguments across different texts.

The Braided Essay

The culminating assessment for this unit is a braided analytical essay designed to prompt students to move beyond classic literary analysis by synthesizing ideas across multiple genres and perspectives. Instead of organizing essays by individual texts, students are expected to structure their writing around thematic strands that emerge throughout the unit, integrating evidence from *1984*, “The Pedestrian”, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, “First They Came”, excerpts from *Man's Search for Meaning*, and the introductory readings. Themes such as tyranny, resistance, conformity, truth, moral responsibility, individuality, or human dignity may be selected to guide the organization of these essays, rather than treating each work as an isolated analysis. This approach encourages students to recognize that each text offers a distinct perspective on the unit's essential questions, while collectively strengthening their understanding of the enduring relationship between power and human agency.

The braided essay functions as the culmination of the analytical work completed throughout the unit. Weekly Literary Response Journals, annotation activities, Socratic seminars, and thesis development exercises provide students with multiple opportunities to gather evidence, refine interpretations, and establish thematic connections across texts prior to composing their final essays. For instance, a student examining the theme of resistance might combine Leonard Mead's quiet refusal to conform in “The Pedestrian,” the moral decision of those who walk away from Omelas, Winston Smith's struggle to preserve truth and individuality in *1984*, Martin Niemöller's warning against silence in “First They Came,” and Viktor Frankl's assertion that meaning and human dignity can persist even under extreme oppression. Organizing essays around shared themes rather than individual works enables students to demonstrate both their comprehension of each text and their capacity to synthesize literature, philosophy, memoir, poetry, and historical background into an organized argument. Ultimately, the braided essay requires students to examine how these diverse voices collectively illuminate the complexities of tyranny, resistance, and moral responsibility, strengthening the unit's central concept that resistance often begins with the courage to preserve truth, conscience, and humanity.

Classroom Activities

Introduction Activity: Rights, Responsibilities, and Resistance

I currently teach an in-class writing activity called “The Role of a Citizen” as part of my Citizenship unit. This activity helps me see how well students can write and what they know about their rights as U.S. citizens. For this unit, I’ve updated the activity and now call it “Rights, Responsibilities, and Resistance of a Citizen.” That name might change. My aim is for students to start the unit by thinking about what they already know about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. This helps reveal what they understand and what they might not know yet. Students will do a timed writing exercise in class, responding to three prompts in paragraph form. I want them to focus on sharing their thoughts, not just giving the ‘right’ answer, even if they

are not familiar with the concepts. First, they will think about the rights U.S. citizens have, where those rights come from, who protects them, and why they are important. Next, they will look at the responsibilities that go along with those rights, considering what people owe to their communities, the government, and each other. Finally, they will tackle a bigger question that is central to the unit: When, if ever, should citizens question or resist authority? For all three prompts, students should use examples from what they already know, history, current events, or their own lives. Since this writing happens before any formal lessons on the unit's topics, their responses will give me useful insight into their assumptions and possible misunderstandings, and will introduce the main questions we'll explore throughout the unit.

Bill of Rights: Rights under Tyranny

After learning about their rights and responsibilities as U.S. citizens, students will work together to look at the Bill of Rights through the lens of authoritarianism. In small groups, they will put an assigned amendment into modern words and then think about how the Party in *1984* might change or remove that right, explaining why an authoritarian government would see it as a threat. Each group will create a visual display showing the original amendment, their modern version, a "Big Brother" version, and a short explanation connecting the amendment to ideas like tyranny, censorship, surveillance, or resistance. The class will finish with a gallery walk and a group discussion, encouraging students to think about which rights are most important for protecting individual freedom and reminding everyone that protecting rights depends on citizens who are informed and involved.

Poetry Annotation Activity: "First They Came"

At the end of our unit on tyranny and resistance, students will take part in a guided annotation activity using Martin Niemöller's poem "First They Came." Since many of my seniors have little experience with poetry analysis, I will start by showing them how to look for repetition, structure, word choice, and theme. After that, students will work together in small groups to annotate the poem. As they find literary and rhetorical devices, they will discuss how each one adds to the poem's main message about silence, complicity, and moral responsibility. For example, the repeated phrase, "Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me,"²⁹ highlights one of the unit's main ideas: resistance does not always mean open rebellion. The poem shows how failing to question injustice or stand up for others can make oppressive systems stronger. After annotating and discussing the poem, students will write a short response connecting its message to *1984* and to the bigger themes of tyranny, resistance, and human agency we have studied. This lesson gives students a step-by-step way to read poetry and helps them practice close reading and thematic analysis across different types of texts.

Reflection Activity: Conversation with their former selves

At the end of the unit, students will take part in a reflective activity that connects back to the writing they did on the first day. Before class—or more likely, in the first few minutes—I will hand back each student's original timed writing on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, without any feedback or changes. At the start of class, students will reread what they wrote and mark parts that show their assumptions, misunderstandings, or ideas that have stayed the same. I will give clear definitions for these terms to help them. Then, students will write a reflection that responds to their first ideas, using what they have learned from the literature, nonfiction, poetry, and history we studied. Instead of just listing what they learned, students will explain *how* and *why* their thinking has changed, using specific examples from *1984*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The Pedestrian", "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", *Man's Search for Meaning*, "First They Came", and the

contemporary nonfiction we covered.

After writing their reflections, students will take part in a gallery walk. Anonymous excerpts from both their first writings and their final reflections will be posted around the classroom. As they read each other's work, students will leave comments that point out growth, new perspectives, or interesting ideas. The lesson will end with a group discussion about this question: How has your understanding of resistance changed? Students will be encouraged to see that resistance is more than just rebellion. They will think about different forms of resistance, like telling the truth, standing up to injustice, refusing to go along with wrong actions, keeping their humanity, and showing moral courage when facing oppression. By looking back at their original writing, I hope students finish the unit with a clear sense of how they have grown as analytical readers and how much more they understand about the complex links between tyranny, resistance, and human agency.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Standards -- Alaska Academic Standards for English Language Arts -- 12th grade. These standards can be easily cross-referenced to other standards.

RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Students will consistently examine themes of resistance, tyranny, moral responsibility, and truth throughout *1984* and compare them with those in additional dystopian short stories in their literary response journals.

RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama, including how characters, settings, and plot contribute to the development of themes and ideas.

Students will analyze a variety of authors' choices in developing their characters, who quietly or boldly resist oppressive regimes. An example of this would be Le Guin's authorial decision to have her characters physically remove themselves as a form of resistance to oppression.

RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.

Students will analyze the methods nonfiction authors use to construct arguments concerning totalitarianism and resistance, exemplified by Viktor Frankl's account of resistance to oppression in concentration camps.

W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Students will construct a Braided essay for their culminating activity, which consists of developing original claims, synthesizing evidence and analysis across texts, and constructing an argument about resistance to tyrannical entities.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on

grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Through discussions of their literary response journals and the collaborative process for preparing the braided essay, students will meet this standard.

RI.11–12.9 Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. and world documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Students will analyze foundational U.S. documents, such as the Bill of Rights, for literary significance and themes of individuality and moral responsibility.

Resources

Bibliography for teachers

Arendt, Hannah. 2017. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Penguin Modern Classics. London, England: Penguin Classics. This book is a great resource for building background knowledge on the usage of propaganda in totalitarian regimes, specifically in Nazi Germany.

Aristotle. Selections from *Politics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 264. Harvard Univ. Press, 1932. This collection gives teachers essential philosophical discussions about citizenship, justice, why governments exist, and how individuals relate to the state.

Bradbury, Ray. 1951. "The Pedestrian." *The Reporter*, August 7, 1951. This is the mentor text for the braided essay.

Frankl, Viktor E. 2006. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press. A powerful account of Frankl's time in Auschwitz, and a complementary historical companion to 1984.

James, CLR. *Toussaint Louverture*. Ed. Christian Høgsbjerg. Foreword by Laurent Dubois. Duke

Univ. Press, 2013. A great play that showcases the only successful slave revolt in history. This is a great piece for highlighting historical resistances.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1973. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. HarperCollins. This is the mentor text for the braided essay.

Livy. Life of Cincinnatus. In *History of Rome, Volume II: Books 3–4*. Trans. B.O. Foster. Loeb

Classical Library 133. Harvard Univ. Press, 1922. This primary source tells the story of Cincinnatus, who gave up power by choice. It gives teachers helpful background for talking about civic virtue, republican leadership, and the ethical use of political authority.

Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes*. In *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*. Eds. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. Modern Library, 2007. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* offers helpful background for teachers who want to better understand the literary and philosophical influences on George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell refers to Milton's work several times in the novel. Knowing *Samson Agonistes* can help teachers lead richer classroom discussions about resistance, moral conviction, suffering, and the challenge of keeping one's integrity under oppression, even if students do not read the text themselves.

National Archives. 2025. "The Bill of Rights: A Transcription." National Archives. The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. April 28, 2025.

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>. This is a great resource for introducing themes of individual and moral responsibility as a citizen of the United States.

Niemöller, Martin. "First They Came." Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. Accessed July 9, 2026. <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/>. This is the mentor text for the braided essay.

Orwell, George. *1984*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1949. This is the mentor text for the braided essay.

Plato, from *The Statesman*. In *The Collected Dialogues*. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington

Cairns. Princeton Univ. Press, 1961. Plato's *Statesman* gives teachers helpful background by exploring what makes a just leader and how government should work. Themes presented support the unit's focus on tyranny, civic responsibility, and resistance, giving teachers a wider perspective for leading conversations about the ethical use of power in *1984* and related texts.

The Red Nation Collective. *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save our Earth*. Common

Notions, 2021. This text gives teachers a current Indigenous perspective on resistance, justice, and collective responsibility. It offers helpful background for classroom conversations about power, civic engagement, and moral choices.

Schrader, Paul, dir. *First Reformed*. Killer Films, 2017. Schrader's film gives educators a modern way to explore Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience, Frankl's search for meaning, and the tough choices faced by characters like Winston Smith and the people of Omelas. Watching the film can help teachers better understand the unit's main themes and see how both literature and film encourage audiences to think about the balance between personal beliefs and what society expects.

Shakespeare, William. *The Rape of Lucrece*. In *The Norton Shakespeare, Vol. 1: Early Plays and Poems*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. Norton, 2008. While *The Rape of Lucrece* is not part of this unit, Shakespeare's poem gives teachers helpful literary and historical context for themes like tyranny, abuse of power, moral resistance, and political corruption. Its focus on personal conscience and standing up to injustice can help educators lead deeper discussions about the ethical and political issues found in *1984* and the unit's other texts.

Sophocles, *Antigone*. In *Greek Tragedies, Vol. 1*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore.

Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960. This is additional text that illustrates the theme of resistance more discreetly.

Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017. A great resource for introducing your students to the terminology of tyranny and resistance.

Tacitus, *Agricola*. In *Agricola, Germania, Dialogue on Oratory*. Trans. M. Hutton, W. Peterson. Loeb Classical Library 35. Harvard Univ. Press, 1914. This classical text gives teachers historical background to explore authoritarian rule. It helps students link Orwell's critique of totalitarianism to earlier cases of political oppression and moral resistance in the Roman Empire.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." In *The Making of the American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata, 167–95. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016. This essay can be used to support themes present in the short story, "The Pedestrian."

Walker, David. *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Ed. Peter P. Hinks. Penn State

Univ. Press, 2000. Walker's abolitionist text gives teachers important historical background for talking about resistance, moral courage, and civic responsibility. While it is not a main part of this unit, it helps educators understand principled opposition to injustice and supports the themes found in *1984*, *Civil Disobedience*, *On Tyranny*, and the unit's other texts.

Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. London: Penguin Books, 2006. A powerful account of Wiesel's time in a concentration camp, and a complementary historical companion to *1984*. This book is great for teaching students that resistance often preserves truth, identity, and humanity in the face of oppression.

Notes

1. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 19.
2. Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, 17.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 30.
6. Thoreau, "Walking," 182.
7. Bradbury, "The Pedestrian,"
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 9.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid., 82.
15. Ibid., 20.
16. Ibid.
17. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,"
18. Ibid., 76.
19. Ibid.
20. Samuel Kerstein, "Treating Persons as Means," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, April 13, 2019,

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/persons-means/>.

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 66.
23. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
24. Ibid. 37.
25. Ibid., 237.
26. Martin Niemöller, "First They Came for the Socialists,"
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 77
29. Ibid.

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