**BHP 203: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Context: George Orwell’s Enduring Legacy**

**Sample Syllabus (Some particulars may vary slightly in a given semester.)**  
**Course Description:**

“Big Brother is watching you.” Contemporary discussions of politics, journalism, and social issues regularly reflect the influence of George Orwell’s classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The term “Orwellian” routinely appears in contemporary speech and writings. Terms such as Newspeak, Thought Police, Doublethink, and Memory Hole have become a perennial lexicon of political discussion.  Conceived against the ominous backgrounds of the twentieth-century World Wars, Orwell’s provocative writing--crowned by his unnerving dystopian projection--reflects the turbulent world experienced by this courageous and prescient thinker from the waning of British colonialism to the rise of the Cold War. To contextualize the composition and importance of his final haunting novel, this course will explore a wide range of Orwell’s writings, the historical and cultural contexts that shaped him, and the use of his work and ideas by his contemporaries and by subsequent artists, critics, and social analysts.

What does this course count for?

This course fulfills the CLAS general-education requirement for literature OR social science.

What big questions does this course address?

In exploring the genesis, meaning, and impact of George Orwell’s significant texts (fiction, investigative and literary journalism, social commentary, propaganda), this course addresses the following overarching questions:  
  
▪ How do Orwell’s works open a window into the major ideological and societal struggles of the mid-twentieth century?  
  
▪ How do Orwell’s texts illuminate contemporary issues and struggles? (Why and how has the term “Orwellian” been used in various contexts?) In hindsight, how might Orwell want to reconfigure his vision based on events of the last 70 years?  
  
▪ How does Orwell’s writing demonstrate that the “the personal is political”?  
  
▪ How do “political” novels compare with other kinds of fiction and with political nonfiction? What qualities influence the effectiveness of each genre?

▪ How does Orwell’s conception of the proper role for journalists compare with attitudes toward journalism today?

#### How will I be graded?

#### Your final grade will reflect a variety of assignment-types, as follows:

2 Current-events “connection” mini- essays  20 percent (combined)  
            Class discussion, quizzes                                25 percent  
            Study questions                                               30 percent  
            Final synthesis essay (take-home)                  25 percent

#### What will I learn in this course?

By the end of this course, you will be able to  
  
▪ *Analyze* *in-depth* two of the world’s most influential political novels: *Animal Farm* and *1984*▪ *Draw an informed opinion* on how and why have terms and concepts in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (e.g., Newspeak, Big Brother, Thought Police/Thought Crime, Doublethink, Memory Hole) have become a perennial lexicon of political discussion?

#### ▪ *Synthesize a variety of Orwell’s writings* into a coherent picture of the man and the major social and political contexts that shaped his work

#### ▪ *Compare* *with insight* the salient characteristics of various genres, including novels, essays, memoirs, and investigative journalistic reports

#### ▪ *Speak intelligently about the meaning and historical evolution of terms* such as *Marxism, socialism, totalitarianism, communism, socialism, fascism,* and *cold war*

#### ▪ *Speculate thoughtfully on the options for responsible actio*n, including the production of propaganda, in a time of political threat ▪ *Discuss in detail* the ways in which Orwell does (and does not) remain relevant today.

#### How do the course learning objectives relate to the university-wide learning objectives?

#### The reading and writing assignments for this course, along with topics for class discussion, are designed to help you meet the following University Learning Objectives:

#### ▪ Critical thinking ▪ Written Communication ▪ Information Literacy ▪ Ethics/Social Responsibility ▪ Global/Multi-cultural perspectives The frequency of relatively small assignments will enable you to receive constructive feedback throughout the semester.

**Required Texts:**

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (Signet)  
            *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (Signet)  
            *Burmese Days* byGeorge Orwell (Harcourt)  
            *A Collection of Essays* by George Orwell (Harcourt)  
        Supplementary materials on Canvas, including films and videos

**Weekly schedule:**

**● One:**  **Introduction to course and the Historical Context for studying George Orwell**

Read Orwell’s “A Hanging” (1931) and in *Collection*: “Shooting an Elephant” (1936); to prepare for class discussion, think about Study Questions on these two essays in Canvas.

Homework: Read “Marrakech” (1939) and “Why I Write” (1946), “Reflections on Gandhi” (1949) and “Such, Such Were the Joys” (1947) in *Collection*.

Prepare to discuss posted study questions on “Why I Write” and complete **Written** Study Questions #1 in the Assignments Link on Canvas.

**● Two:**    **Conscience and Responsibility: Orwell as both insider and outsider**

Discuss “Marrakech,” “Why I Write,” “Reflections on Gandhi” (1949) and “Such, Such. . . ”

Homework: Read excerpts from *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *Wigan Pier* (1937), and Beadle, “George Orwell’s Literary Studies of Poverty in England.”

 Recommended: Begin reading *Burmese Days* (1934); must be completed by Week Four   
 **Begin first current-events “connection” essay in Assignments**

**● Three:**   **The Burdens of Inequality**

Review Study Questions assignment #1

Discuss *Down and Out* and *Wigan Pier*.  
  
Homework*:* Complete reading *Burmese Days* and read Meyers, “The Ethics of Responsibility: Orwell’s *Burmese Days*” (1968) and complete Written Study Questions #2.

**First current-events “connection” essay due Week Four  
  
● Four: White Man’s Burden**

Discuss current-events connections*.*

Discuss *Burmese Days.*

Homework: Read Hochschild’s “Prologue” from *Spain in their Hearts* and selections from *Homage to Catalonia* (pp. 1-4 and chapter 5); and read in *Collection* “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War.” Be prepared to answer posted study questions on both texts.

**Five: Fighting for a Just Cause**

Discuss *Homage* and “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War”

 Homework: Read Gornick essay; and in *Collection* pp. 234-252 (selection from “Inside the Whale”).

Complete Written Study Question #3.

**Six: Communism: Allure and Backlash in the United States**  
  
Discuss Gornick essay; and selection from “Inside the Whale.”

 Homework:  Read *Animal Farm* and consider posted *Animal Farm* Study Questions for class discussion.

**Seven:** **Pigs and Men**

Discuss *Animal Farm* and study questions.

Homework: View the two versions of “Animal Farm” and complete the Animal Farm **Written** Study Question #4). Read Fleay and Sanders, “Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC” (1989).

**Eight:**  **The (Ab)uses of a fable: Legacies of *Animal Farm***

Discuss the films, study question responses, and the Fleay and Sanders essay.

Homework: Read: “Politics and the English Language” in *Collection*; Orwell “New Words” and “What is Science?” and essay by Nolan, "Orwell Meets Nixon" (Canvas).

**Nine:**  **Big Brother Is Watching You**  
Discuss assigned readings.

Homework: Begin to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (at least through Part Two, section II), annotating your reading using the posted Study Questions as a guide.

**Complete second current-events “connection” essay  
  
Ten:**  **“Good prose is like a windowpane”**

Discuss “Politics and the English Language,” “New Words” and “What is Science” and essay by Nolan. Begin discussing *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*

 Homework: Complete reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and complete Written Study Question #5 in Assignments.

**Eleven: Warning or Prediction? A Dystopia for Orwell’s Time—and Ours**

Discuss *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and assigned study questions.

Homework: Read Orwell, “You and the Atomic Bomb” and selections from Orwell’s “As I Please;” read essay by Timothy Garton Ash, “Orwell’s List.”

**Twelve:**  **11/30** **“Duck and cover”**

View “The Atomic Café” (1982) (“The blackest apocalyptic humor since Dr. Strangelove”)

Discuss: “You and the Atomic Bomb,” “As I Please,” and Ash essay.

 Homework: Read Orwell’s “Raffles and Miss Blandish” in *Collection*, and *New Yorker* essays on Orwell by Louis Menand (“Honest, Decent, Wrong” –2003) and James Wood (“A Fine Rage”—2009).

**Thirteen:**  **A Man of His Time for All Times?**

View video: Christopher Hitchens and George Packer on Orwell

Discuss: “Raffles” and “As I Please” selections as well as *New Yorker* essays.

**Final Synthesis Paper accepted through final exam date.**