

## British Masterpiece

from 1984

Novel by George Orwell



George Orwell  
1903–1950



**READING 5A** Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

(background)  
A scene from the movie *1984*.



**BACKGROUND** Born Eric Blair, the son of a minor official in British colonial India, Orwell was raised to be a supporter of the British Empire. He was sent to all the right schools in England and later took a post with the Imperial Police in British-controlled Burma. Yet he came to hate the job, which made him feel guilty for what he perceived to be colonial oppression of the Burmese people. He quit the job and left Burma, deciding to see how the “other half” lived. He wandered London’s poorest sections, worked as a dishwasher in Paris, and lived among unemployed miners in northern England. Spurred by his loathing of totalitarian regimes, he produced two of the best known political novels of all time, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, before dying of tuberculosis at age 46.

The title *1984* refers to the year in which the novel takes place. Writing just after World War II, Orwell set his novel nearly 40 years into the future, imagining a world divided into three totalitarian superstates forever fighting one another. Britain, known in the novel as Airstrip One, has been absorbed by America into the superstate of Oceania. Society consists of proles (from *proletariat*) leading miserable lives and of members of the INGSOC (from *English Socialist*) Party, who have more privileges than proles do but are under constant surveillance by the Thought Police. In this nightmare world, Winston Smith labors as a minor bureaucrat whose job is to rewrite history. In secret, however, Smith is disgusted with his society and rebels by keeping a diary. The following passage, filled with “Newspeak,” focuses on Winston Smith’s perceptions of his society—and his dangerous plight.

**LITERARY ANALYSIS** Orwell uses specific **details**, such as objects, places, and even language, to describe Oceania’s society. For example, Winston’s twenty-five-cent piece has a picture of Big Brother, the dictator of Oceania who may or may not really exist. Oceania has a Ministry of Truth that is housed in a building shaped like a pyramid. On the building are three slogans, examples of Newspeak, a language full of mindless slogans, simple ideas, and words designed to manipulate and mislead. These details help readers fully imagine Orwell’s invented world.

**WRITE** After you have read the excerpt, write a scene in which you create your own futuristic society. Your society could be a miserable one like the one in *1984*, or it could be more hopeful. Use descriptions of objects and places to help readers envision your future world. In addition, use words, as Orwell does with Newspeak, to help readers understand the mood of the culture. To do that, consider writing a slogan that appears somewhere within your invented world.

“Oceania, ’tis for thee” gave way to lighter music. Winston walked over to the window, keeping his back to the telescreen. The day was still cold and clear. Somewhere far away a rocket bomb exploded with a dull, reverberating roar. About twenty or thirty of them a week were falling on London at present.

Down in the street the wind flapped the torn poster to and fro, and the word INGSOC fitfully appeared and vanished. Ingsoc. The sacred principles of Ingsoc. Newspeak, doublethink, the mutability of the past. He felt as though he were wandering in the forests of the sea bottom, lost in a monstrous  
10 world where he himself was the monster. He was alone. The past was dead, the future was unimaginable. What certainty had he that a single human creature now living was on his side? And what way of knowing that the dominion of the Party would not endure *for ever*? Like an answer, the three slogans on the white face of the Ministry of Truth came back at him:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

He took a twenty-five-cent piece out of his pocket. There, too, in tiny clear lettering, the same slogans were inscribed, and on the other face of the coin the head of  
20 Big Brother. Even from the coin the eyes pursued you. On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrapping of a cigarette packet—everywhere. Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed—no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull.

The sun had shifted round, and the myriad windows of the Ministry of Truth, with the light no longer shining on them, looked grim as the loopholes of a fortress. His heart quailed before the enormous pyramidal shape. It was too strong, it could not be stormed. A thousand rocket bombs would not batter it down. He wondered  
30 again for whom he was writing the diary. For the future, for the past—for an age that might be imaginary. And in front of him there lay not death but annihilation. The diary would be reduced to ashes and himself to vapor. Only the Thought Police would read what he had written, before they wiped it out of existence and out of memory. How could you make an appeal to the future when not a trace of you, not even an anonymous word scribbled on a piece of paper, could physically survive?

