

## 1984 Study Guide/Socratic Seminar Questions

**Author:** George Orwell    **Genre:** Dystopian; Science Fiction; Drama

**Year Published:** 1949    **Setting:** Oceania, Airstrip One (London, England)

**Point of View:** Third Person Limited (Winston's)

### Themes:

Language and Communication  
Warfare  
Technology and Modernization  
Repression  
Rebellion

Philosophical Viewpoints  
Violence  
Manipulation  
Loyalty  
Memory and the Past

Power

### Symbols:

- Big Brother
- The Glass Paperweight and St. Clement's Church
- The Place Where There Is No Darkness
- The Telescreens
- The Red-Armed Prole Woman

### Motifs:

- Doublethink
- Urban Decay

### Interesting Facts:

- Since its publication, *1984* has been challenged, and subsequently banned, in select states and countries due to its revolutionary, communist, socialist, and/or sexually explicit content.
- When Apple released Macintosh in *1984*, they did it with the greatest Superbowl commercial ever, made up of scenes from the movie production of *1984*. It was quickly hailed as one of the greatest advertisements in history. "Big Brother" was portrayed as IBM, naturally, and the commercial was directed by Ridley Scott.

### Tools of Characterization:

- Clothing
- Speech and Dialogue
- Food
- Occupation
- Location

### Characters:

**Winston:** Winston Smith is the common man, easy for the reader to identify with, easy to sympathize with. Thirty-nine-years-old, he is frail and thin, and is employed as a records editor or propaganda officer in the Records Department at the Ministry of Truth. An Outer Party member, Winston leads a squalid existence in an apartment at Victory Mansions. A thoughtful and observant intellect, Winston is very concerned with Party philosophy, and in particular its control of history through the manipulation of records, a process in which he participates daily. More than anything, Winston seeks the unadulterated truth – and the only way to attain that is by rebelling against the totalitarian rule of the Party.

**O'Brien:** A mysterious, powerful, and sophisticated member of the Inner Party whom Winston believes is also a member of the Brotherhood, the legendary group of anti-Party rebels.

**Julia:** Interestingly enough, Winston's ally and lover is also his foil. Superficially, Julia is an uncomplicated character; but the function she serves isn't quite so simple. Whereas Winston is concerned with a grand scale uprising, Julia is content rebelling against the Party privately – in a self-serving manner. Whereas Winston takes unnecessary risks, Julia is cautious, pragmatic, and a true survivalist. Whereas Winston is one dimensional, in the sense that he is not interested in fooling or escaping from the Party, Julia is duplicitous – presenting the demeanor of a zealous Party member, but rebelling in every way she can away from the telescreens. Although the two share love for each other and hatred for the Party, Winston feels emotional about overthrowing the Party, while Julia is realistic and apathetic. Most of Julia's traits deviate from, if not downright contradict, Winston's.

**Big Brother:** Though he never appears in the novel, and though he may not actually exist, Big Brother, the perceived ruler of Oceania, is an extremely important figure. Everywhere Winston looks he sees posters of Big Brother's face bearing the message "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU." Big Brother's image is stamped on coins and broadcast on the unavoidable telescreens; it haunts Winston's life and fills him with hatred and fascination.

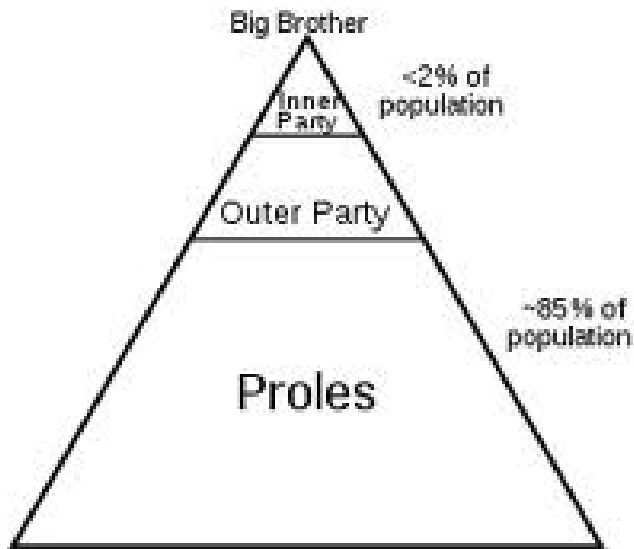
**Mr. Charrington:** An old man who runs a secondhand store in the prole district. Kindly and encouraging, Mr. Charrington seems to share Winston's interest in the past. He also seems to support Winston's rebellion against the Party and his relationship with Julia, since he rents Winston a room without a telescreen in which to carry out his affair.

**Mr. Parsons:** A fat, obnoxious, and dull Party member who lives near Winston and works at the Ministry of Truth. He has a dull wife and a group of suspicious, ill-mannered children who are members of the Junior Spies.

**Syme:** An intelligent, outgoing man who works with Winston at the Ministry of Truth. Syme specializes in language. As the novel opens, he is working on a new edition of the Newspeak dictionary. Winston believes Syme is too intelligent to stay in the Party's favor.

**Emmanuel Goldstein:** Another figure who exerts an influence on the novel without ever appearing in it. According to the Party, Goldstein is the legendary leader of the Brotherhood. He seems to have been a Party leader who fell out of favor with the regime. In any case, the Party describes him as the most dangerous and treacherous man in Oceania.

**Proles:** The proles are really a group of people. But they function with the importance of a single character. In fact, they all around seem like one, collective character because they're not singled out as individuals. That's the point of the proles – they're just a nameless, mindless mass. They're not smart, they're ignorant, and they're basically just workers – but they're happy. They're happy and human because they are not subject to the same scrutiny and control that Winston and his peers are.



## Works Cited

SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on 1984." SparkNotes.com.

SparkNotes LLC. 2007. Web. 3 May 2013.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "1984" *Shmoop.com*. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 5 May 2013.



## 1984 Socratic Seminar Questions:

Name:

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions on separate sheets of paper, using **textual evidence** (direct quotes or paraphrases **with citations**—include page #s) to support your response. If you have your own copy of the novel, you only need to provide the parenthetical notation, and you may highlight or underline the text in your book.

### Language and Communication:

1. Can you really narrow the range of thought by narrowing vocabulary, as the Party seeks to do? What does that mean for people with small vocabularies – would they think less? Why does the Party think so? Can you think of counterexamples to the Party's proposition?
2. What is the role of slang in a society adopting a systematized language base? How and why does some slang make it into the dictionary?
3. Why does the English language have many vernaculars and colloquialisms? What is the purpose for each? Do you have an argument for why they should be eliminated or encouraged?
4. What is the role of synonyms and antonyms in language, if, as Syme and Winston reasoned, all they are good for is taking up space in the dictionary?

### ***Some things to think about:***

Even if people communicate solely in Newspeak, and the control of language is centralized in Oceania by the Party, it would not be possible to narrow the range of thought to eliminate the possibility of subversion. Therefore, the Party's ambitions are impossible.

Language limits thought, and thought is dependent on language. Indeed, no thought can be had without the right words with which to express it. Therefore, the Party's ambitions are attainable.

### Philosophical Viewpoints:

5. According to Ingsoc, the Party's ideology, reality exists only in the mind of the individual. Do you believe an external reality exists independent of perception? If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?
6. Is reality necessarily subjective for Winston? Can there ever be an objective account of history and its events in *1984*, or is reality dependent upon the observer?
7. Winston spends a lot of time ruminating on metaphysical questions, but no one else seems to be doing this at all. What is it about Winston that makes him different from his peers, that drives him to ask these philosophical questions?

### ***Some things to think about:***

Although Ingsoc preaches that reality exists only in the mind of the individual, objective reality exists insofar as it is possible to assess the collective minds of all the people – therein resides actuality, untainted by subjective perception.

It is necessary for the Party to control the past in order to control the present. However, it is not necessary to control the present in order to control the future.

### Power:

8. What are the different ways that the Party obtains and maintains power in Oceania? Which is the most potent?
9. What does it mean to want power for power's sake? Is this what the Party does? What is power good for, anyway, other than to gain other things such as money, control, and even more power?
10. What are some of the rights confiscated altogether by the Party?
11. What is the most difficult for Winston to lose?
12. How does the Party's propaganda indoctrinate and control thought? Come on, is it REALLY working?

### ***Some things to think about:***

O'Brien's description of power as "a boot stamping on a human face [...] forever" is misguided, because power is more about influence and authority than victory over resistance. This is the Party's fatal flaw in *1984*.

*1984* demonstrates that totalitarianism is a devastating political agenda, because it is necessarily dependent upon fear, classism, and physical torture. Without these elements, the Party would have no power.

### Warfare:

13. Why is it necessary for Oceania to be engaged in perpetual war?
14. Adding to the first question, why does it have to be perpetual war with a constantly shifting enemy? Why TWO other superstates, instead of one?

### ***Some things to think about:***

It is necessary for Oceanians to believe that Oceania is in a constant state of warfare with the other superpowers, because the presence of a common enemy prevents internal conflict.

The constant bombing and warfare in Oceania are simulated by the Party for the purpose of manipulating its constituents, as evidenced by subtle inconsistencies in the book.

### Violence:

15. Which is worse for Winston, physical or psychological torture?
16. How is torture regarded in *1984*? What is it used for, exactly, and how would the Party's power be weakened without it?
17. In *1984*, is torture justified as a means to an end (Machiavellian)? NO!? Think about it – it would be a fun case to argue.

### *Some things to think about:*

Although Winston is subjected to excruciating physical torture for a prolonged time, his spirit is ultimately broken by the psychological torture he suffers.

Julia betrays Winston easily upon being tortured because she is essentially a survivalist; Winston, on the other hand, does not give up until the very end because he is a natural-born rebel.

### Technology and Modernization:

18. After all the reality TV shows that people willingly take part in, you're probably thinking, well, what's the big deal? After all, there's even a show called Big Brother. So, what's the big deal with being monitored 24/7? Is it a source of entertainment? Of control? How does surveillance function in *1984*, specifically?
19. How would the Party be weakened if it could not use surveillance its citizens?

### *Something to think about:*

The surveillance of its constituents by the Party is necessary for its self-preservation because it affords the Party the ability to eliminate potential subversion early on. It is the most important element of the Party's tools.

### Manipulation:

20. Legally speaking, toiling with records and evidence is called "spoliation" and is punishable as perjury and contempt. Too bad there's no government around to enforce this kind of law. But this brings up an interesting question: What do you make of the fact that the government of Oceania seems to have no one to answer to? Do "laws" and "rules" lose their meaning in *1984*? What about "justice?"
21. Why does the Party force its members to expunge all documents and photographs?

### *Some things to think about:*

Although the Party seeks to control everything by manipulating every source of information, ultimately it is unable to achieve that goal because that manipulation is overpowered by the unalterable nature of its people's collective memory.

Winston Smith is the only character that can escape the effects of the Party's manipulation and control of information. Yet *1984* fails to explain his distinctive qualities as justification for his different nature.

### Repression:

22. Does Julia's sexual appetite seem normal? Why does the Party seek to repress it?
23. Do you believe the Party's proposition that if people are no longer interested in sex, that they will devote all their energies to worshipping the Party?

### *Something to think about:*

The fickleness of Winston Smith's varicose ulcer is indicative of the Party's successful sexual repression of its constituents. Sexual repression is the Party's most potent tool of power and control.

### Loyalty:

24. If Winston and Julia owed private loyalties to each other, why did they ultimately betray the other? Does their betrayal mean that their love wasn't genuine to begin with?
25. Is it possible to feel so much loyalty towards a state that you include all of your fellow citizens in your "family?"

### *Some things to think about:*

It is only by abolishing private loyalties altogether that the Party is able to ensure the undying loyalty of its constituents. This is its most powerful tool of control.

Winston and Julia are captured by the Thought Police at the height of their relationship – at the point when they professed their undying private loyalty to each other – because that constitutes the ultimate form of rebellion against the Party. This is why the Party doesn't apprehend them earlier.

### Rebellion:

26. Rebellion through sex seems pretty customary, but rebellion by keeping a journal? Is the journal remotely effective? What about in the sense of a small, personal victory? In what ways is Winston guilty of the same lack of ambition that Julia is, as far as rebellious dreams go?
27. How different is Julia's private form of rebellion than Winston's hopes for grand-scale rebellion?
28. Are Winston and Julia rebels without a cause? Would that be a problem? What constitutes a legitimate cause for rebellion?

### *Some things to think about:*

As exemplified by the fact that the Party's impossible doctrines drive Winston and Julia to engage in rebellious acts, an overly oppressive state power often causes rebellion by giving its constituents the very causes for rebellion. This is the Party's fatal flaw.

Winston and Julia's love for each other is a more dangerous form of rebellion than their sexual relations are.

### Memory and the Past:

29. How ironic is it to name a garbage chute a "memory hole"? Why do you suppose the Party names that, among other things like the Ministry of Truth and the Ministry of Love, so ironically?
30. How reliable is memory in *1984*? Is this normal? In what ways are the characters' memories affected and altered by what the Party says, by time, and by, well, reality?

### *Something to think about:*

Winston explores his memory in an attempt to reconnect with the past because he believes the past holds the answers to the Party's rise to power in the present. He therefore agrees with the Party's theory that to control the past is to control the future.

### General Questions:

1. What is a totalitarian regime? How does such a regime attain, maintain, and increase power? What is its main concern? How does it compare with other political structures? Democracy, for example?
2. What role does technology play in this book? In what ways does the Party employ technology? In what ways does technology make the overall themes of this book possible?
3. Which is worse: mind control or physical control? In what sense are they one and the same?
4. Think about Newspeak. Does language shape thought? Action? Is language necessary for either thought or action? Without language, does reality exist? Does perception?
5. What role does Big Brother or Emmanuel Goldstein have in the book? Do they exist? Must they exist? How do they affect Winston? Is Winston's obsession with Big Brother really the same as his obsession with Goldstein?
6. So someone somewhere said that one who controls the past also control the present, and therefore, the future. True, or not so true? What role does memory play in an accurate account of history? Can history ever be objective, after all?
7. Winston says at one point that he "understands the how, but not the why" behind the Party. This is before he is apprehended, tortured, and converted. At any point during this marathon of unfortunate events does he get to know the why? Do we, the readers, get to know the why? If so, what is it?
8. What is the effect of having the story broken into three, distinct parts?
9. Take a look at the three Ingsoc mantras: war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. The first two are natural opposites (at least last time we checked). But what about that last one? Orwell seems to be saying that ignorance is the opposite of strength. Why not say "weakness is strength?" Does *1984* make a successful argument for ignorance being the same thing as weakness?