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Animal Farm

Written by GEORGE ORWELL

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Teacher's Guide written by Laura Reis Mayer

INTRODUCTION

Eighty years have passed since George Orwell first published *Animal Farm*, his classic allegory warning against the establishment of authoritarian rule in the wake of the Russian Revolution. What begins for the animals as a triumphant victory over oppression turns into a systematic takeover of a democratic republic, complete with the erosion of truth, the weaponization of language, the manipulation of information, and the gaslighting of a gullible citizenry.

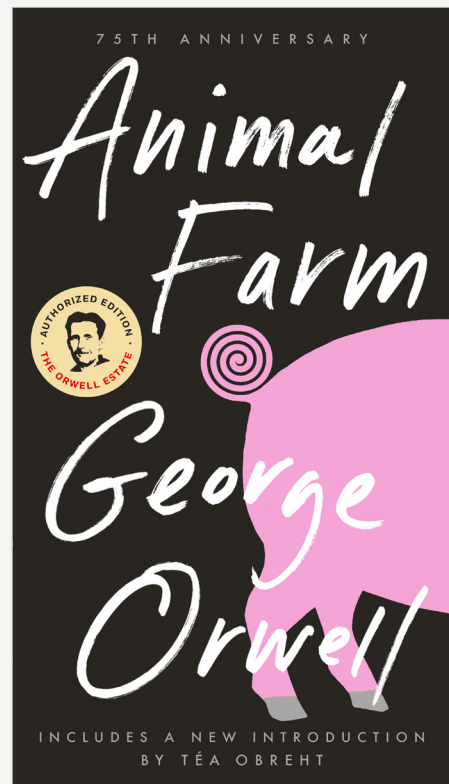
Orwell subtitled the novel "A Fairy Story," but its themes continue to resonate with a modern audience. For students living in a world shaped by AI, digital information, and misinformation, *Animal Farm* reads as eerily familiar. The text has become today's reality, a reflection of what happens when we lose sight of the past, when we think and speak in hashtags and political mantras, when we allow history to be rewritten and memories erased, and when we place more importance on individual leaders than on the communities they serve.

This teaching guide frames its contents on the following line of inquiry: *How is Animal Farm both political parody and contemporary commentary on the dangers of authoritarianism?* Educators can assign any combination of the guide's activities, which ask students to read, write, think, and speak critically. Orwell's timeless text will inspire students to examine the value of truth as they consider their future roles in a world with much to learn from its past and present. Because classroom contexts vary, teachers are encouraged to adapt, substitute, or omit examples as appropriate for their students and communities.

Teacher's Guide

Includes:

PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT,
READING THE TEXT,
SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT,
and **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**



PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

Before reading the text, generate interest and provide access by building student knowledge in history, politics, and genre.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Support students' access to *Animal Farm* with the use of essential questions that frame the novel's big ideas. These questions are introduced at the beginning of reading and model how to set a purpose for reading, how to engage in inquiry, and how to think critically. Ultimately, students should ask and answer their own questions as they read. The following questions engage students in reading, writing, thinking, and talking about the text.

1. What do corrupt leaders do to establish and maintain power?
How can we recognize authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and oligarchy?
2. How can language be used to influence or control groups of people?
3. What role does education play in shaping individuals and societies?
4. What role can the media play in shaping public understanding and promoting propaganda? What is the significance of a free press?
5. How does social media influence the spread of misinformation?
How can it support reform?
6. What responsibilities, if any, do citizens have when they witness abuse or corruption in leadership?

INTRODUCTION TO ALLEGORY

Introduce students to allegory as a genre and a social tool with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Project on the classroom wall a copy of Thomas Poole's "The Blinding Sun: An Introduction to Allegory" (rhlink.com/blindingsun), which summarizes and analyzes Plato's famous allegory. After students read the passage independently, ask them to turn and talk with a partner, discussing what point the allegory makes. As a class, discuss the passage's assertion that "Plato wanted us to know that often, when we finally find enlightenment and truth, we cannot go back to the lives of ignorance we led before."

Challenge students to keep this in mind as they read Orwell's text. Students should ask themselves while reading *Animal Farm*: *What "enlightenment and truth" becomes evident to the animals? To the reader? How is Orwell's book an allegory for the Russian Revolution? How might it also apply to other historical or contemporary contexts?*

NEWSCLIP

Introduce students to a notable moment in American media history and the use of language to frame contested information. Write or post on the whiteboard the phrase "alternative facts," and ask students to brainstorm in writing any associations and implications they think of. Ask students to share their thinking with a classmate and then with the larger group.

PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

Next, show students the 2017 Meet the Press interview in which Kellyanne Conway used the phrase “alternative facts” while responding to criticism of Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s statements about President Donald Trump’s inauguration crowd (rhlink.com/alternativefacts). The phrase quickly entered public discourse and was widely discussed in connection with questions about facts, interpretation, political communication, and media trust.

Discuss Chuck Todd’s response that “alternative facts are not facts.” Ask: *What does Conway appear to mean when she uses the phrase “alternative facts”? Why did the phrase receive so much public attention? What is the difference between a fact, an interpretation, a perspective, and a falsehood? What are the implications when public figures, journalists, or citizens use language differently to describe the same event?*

Explain that Orwell explored how language can shape thought and public understanding. In 1984, Orwell coined terms such as “Newspeak” and “doublethink,” and later readers and critics have often used the word “Orwellian” to describe public language that appears to obscure, reverse, or destabilize meaning. Discuss: *Where do we see debates over language, facts, interpretation, and public trust today? What is the impact?*

EXPLORE BOARD

To build knowledge around the Russian Revolution and other ideas that provide historical and conceptual context for *Animal Farm*, present students with a digital explore board. Explore boards are interactive, digital documents (like Google Docs) that hold a collection of multimedia resources. They build background and interest on content students are preparing to read, and they offer choice, as well as a variety of media.

Students can work independently or in partners, choosing the topic and media they most want to explore. After research, students can share their learning with classmates via a collaborative whiteboard tool such as Padlet or Superstructures. Sharing can occur before or during reading. For more on explore boards, as well as sample boards and templates, see Ditch That Textbook (rhlink.com/boards). Topics for an *Animal Farm* explore board might include:

- Authoritarianism: rhlink.com/authoritarianism
- Cult of Personality: rhlink.com/personality
- Disinformation: rhlink.com/disinformation
- Propaganda: libguides.com.edu/Propaganda
- The Russian Revolution: www.history.com/articles/russian-revolution
- Stalin and Trotsky: rhlink.com/trotsky
- Totalitarianism: rhlink.com/unveilingtotalitarianism

READING THE TEXT

The following activities promote critical reading, writing, and thinking as students read the text.

READER RESPONSE JOURNAL

To promote active, close reading, ask students to keep a reader response journal while reading. Response journals are double-column pages that list significant quotations and excerpts from the novel on the left and responses to text on the right. Responses might include analysis, questions, connections, and additional reactions that help students engage with the text. These journals can be brought to book circles, small-group activities, and class seminars, providing students with text evidence to support their thinking and discussion. The journals can also provide ideas and support for culminating writing products. Students select quotations as they read, but the process should be modeled first.

Quotations from *Animal Farm* that students might choose include:

- *And above all, no animal must ever tyrannise over his own kind. Weak or strong, clever or simple, we are all brothers* (p. 11).
- *... Having once accepted the pigs as their teachers, they absorbed everything that they were told, and passed it on to the other animals by simple arguments* (p. 18).
- *... The education of the young was more important than anything that could be done for those who were already grown up* (pp. 34–35).
- *Bravery is not enough. ... Loyalty and obedience are more important* (p. 55).
- *Whenever anything went wrong, it became usual to attribute it to Snowball* (p. 78).
- *All the same, there were days when they felt that they would sooner have had less figures and more food* (p. 92).
- *It had become usual to give Napoleon the credit for every successful achievement and every stroke of good fortune* (p. 93).
- *All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others* (p. 134).

PROTEST SONGS

In the first chapter of *Animal Farm*, Old Major teaches the animals “Beasts of England,” a song of protest he recalls from long ago (pp. 12–13). Project the song on the whiteboard, and ask students to read silently, reflecting on words, phrases, and imagery that catch their attention or seem significant. Then invite students to approach the board individually, using colored markers to annotate the verses with their thinking. Students might even listen to AI-generated versions of the song available on YouTube. Discuss: *What is the overall message of the song? Why did Major compel the animals to commit it*

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to memory? Why do they forget but then recall the song towards the end of the novel, and why is it banned and replaced with a propaganda melody?

Next, divide students into small groups, let them choose a famous protest song from history or a musical, and ask them to analyze the song together using the “See/Think/Me/We” thinking routine (rhlink.com/seethinkmewe):

- **See:** What do you notice as you listen and read lyrics?
- **Think:** What thoughts do you have about the song?
- **Me:** What personal and literary connections can you make to the song?
- **We:** How might the song be connected to our country, our world, and our place in it?

Songs to analyze in the activity might include “We Shall Overcome,” “This Land is Our Land,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “A Change is Gonna Come,” “People Get Ready,” “We Gotta Get Out of this Place,” “Give Peace a Chance,” “Rainmaker,” and “Baraye.” Discuss: *What do these songs have in common? How might music and the arts influence public thought or collective action?*

OLIGARCHY EXPLAINER VIDEO

In the years after the revolution, the pigs gradually come to control the farm’s food, crops, exports, and imports. While the other animals starve and work themselves to death, the pigs drink alcohol, sleep in beds, wear clothes, and make jokes about “the lower animals” (p. 138). Napoleon and comrades have become an oligarchy. Ask students to read the interview entitled “Oligarchy is Being used More to Describe America” and to listen to the accompanying podcast (rhlink.com/oligarchy). Ask students to write a one-page explainer defining “oligarchy” and providing examples of how the concept may appear in different historical or contemporary contexts. Using the explainer as a script, students can then record themselves on video.

For explainer videos with all the bells and whistles, Canva provides a free online tool (rhlink.com/Canva). When students post their videos on Instagram or Padlet, they can invite classmates to ask questions and post responses. As a class, discuss: *What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of influential individuals or groups shaping political or economic decisions? Under what conditions might this influence be constructive or problematic?*

ESCAPE MEDIA ANALYSIS

In *Animal Farm*, the animals are provided with only one source of information, the news recited, recreated, and rewritten by Squealer. Explore with students how today’s media landscape compares to Orwell’s depiction. Discuss how free speech and social media can be influenced by bias, misinformation, and varying levels of credibility, and how these factors may shape public understanding. Pose this question and provide time for groups to discuss: *What is your primary source for the news?*

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Next, ask students to read “Influencer, celebrity, journalist? Teens are turning to YouTube for news, survey shows” (rhlink.com/usatodayytinfluencers). Discuss as a group: *Why does Common Sense Media say “it is cause for concern” that many teens are getting their news information from social media rather than newspapers or news sites? What arguments might support or challenge this perspective? Since teens in the survey see news organizations as more trustworthy, why do they still prefer YouTube, Instagram, or Snapchat?*

Next, ask students to select a news story and watch video clips or read articles from three different networks or media sources. Students can use the AllSides media bias chart (rhlink.com/allsidesmediabias) to select a left, right, and centrist source. Ask students to use the “ESCAPE” method of information analysis by working individually or in groups to analyze evidence, source, context, audience, purpose, and execution. Afterwards, discuss: *What similarities and differences did you notice? What specific examples of objectivity or bias did you see? Which source seems the most credible and why? What are the potential benefits of consulting a variety of media sources?*

SCAPEGOATING

One of the key tactics Napoleon employs in *Animal Farm* is the practice of scapegoating in order to instill fear and negate political challenges. Write or project the following quotation on the classroom whiteboard: “When anything ever went wrong it became usual to attribute it to Snowball” (p. 78). Ask students: *What is Napoleon’s purpose in blaming Snowball?*

After students share their thinking, project Facing History’s definition of “scapegoat”: *Scapegoating is often used in disinformation and mal-information. It places the blame for problems and harmful events on a person or a group. Singling out people or groups as scapegoats is often done intentionally to stir up mistrust or hate. It can lead to the targeting or abuse of those being scapegoated.* Ask students to recall specific events from the novel that align with this definition.

Next, direct students to read more about misinformation, disinformation, and rhetorical fallacies (rhlink.com/misinformation). Challenge students to work independently or with a partner to find examples of ad hominem attack, emotive language, and false dichotomy in one of Squealer’s anti-Snowball propaganda speeches (pp. 55–58, 69–71, 77–82).

Afterward, invite students to consider examples of scapegoating from history or contemporary society. Encourage them to think about how and why individuals or groups are blamed during times of fear or uncertainty, and what the consequences may be. Discussion might include Jewish people in Nazi Germany, Japanese Americans in World War II, Muslims after 9/11, as well as other examples that students might identify. Ask students to reference the following resource and discuss methods for countering scapegoating and disinformation (rhlink.com/disinformationhandout).

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BEYOND THE HASHTAG

In *Animal Farm*, the pigs intentionally degrade language in an effort to limit critical thought. Simplified words and slogans such as “Four legs good; two legs bad” replace abstract thinking in an effort to eradicate any chance of critical thinking. Discuss with students: *To what extent might similar patterns appear in contemporary communication? Have short-form language, slogans, or digital communication replaced more nuanced expression in certain contexts?* Choose several widely recognized slogans or hashtags (political, social, or cultural) and write them on the classroom whiteboard. Ask students to jot down words or reactions they associate with each. As hashtags are written, ask students to jot down words or feelings they associate with them.

Afterward, discuss the opposing viewpoints that emerge. Explain the concept of “affective polarization,” which means the more simplified and polar our political and social views become, the less we trust or respect the opposing viewpoint. Discuss: *When can slogans or hashtags be helpful? When might they oversimplify complex ideas? How can we evaluate whether the language we encounter supports deeper understanding and helps us seek truth, rather than oversimplifying reality or polarizing us? How do the slogans in Orwell's novel impact the animals' thoughts and actions? How do today's hashtags, captions, and social media posts impact ours?*

“SEED” PROPAGANDA ANALYSIS

Propaganda is an essential control tool used by the pigs in *Animal Farm*. Discuss the altered slogans, rewritten commandments, revised history, and replacement song Squealer uses to suppress critical thought or opposition. Share some examples of propaganda from today. Popular memes can serve as one example relevant for middle school and high school students (rhlink.com/memes).

- Simplification (extremes, logic leaps, incomplete facts, easy targets)
- Exploitation (fearmongering, flattery, shocking content, deadlines, peer pressure)
- Exaggeration (outlandish outcomes, piggybacking, overhyped success, power plays)
- Division (heroes & villains, polarization, cozying up, stereotypes, name-calling)

Discuss: *Can propaganda serve a positive role? What are its dangers?*

As an extension, provide students with a contemporary or historical example of public messaging—such as a speech, advertisement, or media clip—and ask them to apply the “SEED” framework to evaluate how language, imagery, and framing are used to influence an audience.

Discuss: *Can persuasive messaging serve a positive role? What are its potential risks? What is the relationship between media outlets and the public?*

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How can official spokespersons or institutions shape that relationship?

What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of alternative or nontraditional voices participating in the dissemination of information?

IMAGE ANALYSIS

In chapter VIII of *Animal Farm*, the pigs post a portrait of Napoleon on the barn wall, accompanied by a new poem in his honor. The reader learns “it had become usual to give Napoleon the credit for every successful achievement and every stroke of good fortune” (p. 93). Challenge students to make relevant connections with an image analysis.

Project the fake magazine cover of President Trump wearing a crown, the caption reading “Long Live the King” (rhlink.com/king), which was posted on official White House social media accounts. The accompanying text reads:

“CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD. Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED.

LONG LIVE THE KING!”

An additional image posted on official White House social media pages depicts the President as the Pope (rhlink.com/PopeAI). Ask students to reflect and respond to one or both images with the “See, Think, Wonder” routine (rhlink.com/seethinkwonder) or by using an image analysis template from the Library of Congress (rhlink.com/photosandprints). Provide time for students to share their reflections with a partner before discussing with the class.

Ask: What is the purpose in depicting the U.S. president as a king or religious leader? What is the impact? How might they function as satire, commentary, or persuasion? What are the connections to Napoleon’s depiction on the barn wall in Animal Farm, and to crediting him with egg production and other successes? How are social media and AI shaping the interpretation and understanding of political leaders? Discuss implications in the novel and in the modern world.

PROS AND CONS DEBATE

In *Animal Farm*, Napoleon trains the dogs to serve as his personal police force, trained to quell protests by any means necessary. Challenge students to think critically and make relevant connections by debating the use of government force in response to public protest or civil unrest. Ask students to read two articles about the use of National Guard troops to serve as a “Domestic Civil Disturbance Quick Reaction Force.” One article supports such use of troops (rhlink.com/debate1); the other opposes it (rhlink.com/debate2).

After reading, students write a one-sentence summary of each article’s central claim, and create a pro/con list for the use of a special National Guard unit to quell protests in major U.S. cities. Using a collaborative, critical thinking tool such as Superstructures (superstructures.io) or Padlet (padlet.com), students can post pros and cons, support their points with reasoning from the articles

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and from their own opinions, and react to classmates' posts. The result is a visible thinking map on the class whiteboard.

Discuss as a class: *Is the use of force against a protesting citizenry a "model for saving America's cities" or a "foray into dark new territory"? What might Orwell say?*

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

These text-dependent questions can be used for reading, writing, discussion, and research.

1. How is Old Major's speech in chapter one both a prophecy and a warning? In what ways do the animals heed and ignore his words throughout the text?
2. How are fear and force used in the novel? In what ways are these timeless tools?
3. In what ways do the sheep use language in order to control the masses? Consider both written and spoken language.
4. What role does Boxer play in Orwell's text? What group does he represent in society?
5. How and why is literacy controlled in the novel? What may have gone differently if more animals could read?
6. How are the puppies (and then adult dogs) used in the novel? What message might Orwell be conveying about education and influence?
7. Discuss the role of Squealer and the impact of propaganda in the novel. Is it possible to "rewrite the past"?
8. Why does Moses, the tame raven, return at the end of the novel? What is his purpose, and how does it support the new regime?
9. In what ways does food both reward and control the animals on the farm? Why does Squealer lie about its availability?
10. In what ways do the animals contribute to their own outcomes on the farm?

TRIPLE-COLUMN CHART: 10 STEPS TO AUTOCRACY

In her introduction to the novel, Téa Obreht defines George Orwell's purpose in *Animal Farm* as to "efficiently demonstrate how autocrats seize power" (p. xiv). Help students make a relevant and timely connection by analyzing Georgia politician Stacey Abrams' "10 Steps to Autocracy" (rhlink.com/autocracy).

Working in pairs, students will reference the article and record the ten steps in the first column of a triple-column chart. Next, partners discuss each of the ten steps to autocracy in the context of Orwell's novel, recording relevant text examples of each step in column two. Finally, students will watch a video

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of Stacey Abrams discussing the ten steps (rhlink.com/autocracy2). As they watch, students fill out column three, recording specific current events that illustrate each step towards autocracy.

Afterward, discuss as a class: Abrams says we are already at step nine. *Has she provided compelling evidence to back her claim? What is she telling us we need to do as citizens under threat of losing our democracy? How does her argument support or extend Obrecht's introduction to the novel, where she says "many of the farm's animals are naturally susceptible to manipulation and the cult of personality" (p. xv)? How might different perspectives evaluate this argument? What connections can be made to Animal Farm?*

INFOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Use infographics to synthesize the connections between Orwell's novel and contemporary discussions of propaganda. Ask students to apply the "See, Think, Wonder" routine as they examine "GEC Special Report: August 2020 Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," (rhlink.com/influence) a set of infographics examining claims about Russia's influence on public discourse.

As students reflect on Russia's tactics to push government agendas on U.S. social media platforms, ask them to record their thinking:

- What do I see?
- What do I think about that?
- What does it make me wonder?

Students can share their responses with a partner before discussing as a large group: *What claims do these infographics make about the use of social media in spreading disinformation? What evidence is presented? How can we explain the "media multiplier effect," and what steps can we take to combat it?* Discuss how these infographics support Russell Baker's afterword to *Animal Farm*, where he calls the novel "an allegorical lesson . . . written out of a controlled and icy hatred for the cynicism of the Soviet system—but also out of despair for all deluded people who served it gladly . . . *Animal Farm* left us a lesson about the human contribution to political terror that will always be as up-to-date as next year's election" (pp. 145–152).

Discuss: *How do humans contribute to the spread of information and ideas? What are the lessons of Animal Farm, and how might they apply in different contexts?*

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCT

Challenge students to produce an in-depth multimedia response to one of the essential questions posed at the beginning of this guide, integrating ideas from Orwell's text with outside research and their own thinking.

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT

For example, students might choose: *Why is education a significant component of social justice?* Their product could focus on an issue highlighted in *Animal Farm*, such as debates around education policy, access to schooling, or the role of public and private institutions. Students should research online resources that bridge Orwell's book with historic or contemporary sociopolitics. The multimedia products should reflect individual student choice and interests, and might include:

- A "TED Talk"-type video, complete with scripted narration aided by cue cards. Students can use cell phones or tablets to record their talks.
- A digital story using iMovie. Digital stories combine narration, music, and still images and are easily created on student laptops.
- A web page combining multiple digital features to tell a story. With Google Sites or Adobe Express, students can combine text, social graphics, video, and audio.
- An interactive infographic using free software from Canva, or Piktochart.
- A podcast in self-narrated or interview form documenting historic or contemporary issues from the text (or both).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used for further background, research, writing, and discussion.

- "Deepfakes and Disinformation" (rhlink.com/deepfakes)
- "How Disinformation Spreads and Why It's So Hard to Combat" (rhlink.com/howdisinformationspreads)
- "The Importance of a Free Press" (rhlink.com/freepress)
- Media and Influence (rhlink.com/media)
- "10 Tips to Spot Media Manipulation" (<https://newseumed.org/cantdupeme>)
- "What is 'Animal Farm,' Now 80, About? Maybe Not What You Think." (rhlink.com/animalfarm)

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