

## Making *1984* Relevant in 2004

by  
Wendy Higgins

“How would you feel if you were *always* being watched?” I posed this question to college-prep twelfth graders studying Georg Orwell’s *1984*. Most of them were already in possession of their college acceptance letters, and motivating them was no easy task.. After ten seconds of no response, I tried again.

“What if every thing you said and did, even your facial gestures, could be used against you?” I scanned the room, noticing that each victim of senioritis avoided eye contact. It was my last two weeks of student teaching and I was clearly losing them. Finally, a bored voice from the back of the room spoke up.

“It’s just not real. That could never happen.”

And there it was. Despite our discussions about Stalin, Hitler and modern dictatorships, they could not relate to ideas so seemingly distant. As I gazed out at their uninterested faces, I knew that I needed to zap them into realization and make it relevant.

“You don’t believe that someone could be spying on you *right now*?” I asked. As they shrugged off this question, a sneaky idea jostled my mind.

After school I approached my cooperating teacher with the idea and she excitedly agreed. With a little scheming and plotting I was ready to implement the lesson I now call the “Thoughtcrime Arrests.” I offer this to all of you twelfth grade teachers who dread the swiftly approaching senior-slump, as I do.

### **Procedure:**

This lesson must be planned a week in advance and should take place when the students are nearing completion of the book.

1. Choose a student from each class that you think will be trustworthy and that the other students would not suspect as a member of the “Thought Police”.
2. Approach each student and ask each if he/she would be willing to be the class “spy” for one week. These students must be sworn to secrecy! Explain that this is just for fun. If the student agrees, give him or her a list of all students’ names in their class. The spy’s job is to put a mark next to the name of any student guilty of the following offenses:
  - Saying anything negative about school, schoolwork, teachers, administration or fellow students.
  - Sleeping in class
  - Making especially intelligent comments

- Making especially open-minded comments

\* The spy should be spying on their classmates in and out of the English classroom, but only at school.

\* The spy is not to write down what the students say; they are only to place a mark for each “offense”.

3. After one week, collect the checklist from the spy and tally the top 3-4 offenders.
4. Print out an arrest warrant for the three top offenders with their specific thoughtcrimes identified. The student with the most marks will be “vaporized”. (Example attached)
5. Speak to the school’s resource officer or an administrator about participating in the lesson as an arresting officer of the Thought Police. If he or she agrees to participate, provide the following things and instructions:
  - The arrest warrants with the specific class period and students’ names
  - Ask the arresting officer to show up about 10 minutes into the period and very seriously call the four students out of class.
  - Give each student his or her arrest warrants and allow time to read.
  - After five minutes, the students return to class, with the exception of the vaporized, who will go to the library or place of the teacher’s choice.
6. By now, the curiosity of the class should be sufficiently peaked. When the students return to class, allow them to explain the arrests and their feelings. Do not reveal the spy’s name until class discussion is complete.
  - Explain that the vaporized student should not be spoken of that day.
  - Ask students how they feel, knowing that they were spied on all week.
  - Plead with students not to tell your other classes about the arrests, so that those following students may experience the same surprise.

**YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR THOUGHTCRIME AGAINST  
THE INSTITUTION OF THE SCHOOL.**

**Attention (Student's name):**

**For the entirety of the past week you have been under surveillance by a spy for the Thought Police posing as a fellow comrade English student. Your disloyalty to the Party has been made known.**

**For your outcries against your school, schoolwork, and comrades, you are hereby arrested and will undergo extensive psychological treatment to cure you of your ailment. Once the rigorous torture and brainwashing is complete, you will love every aspect of school. It is only at that time that you may be safely released back into your scholarly society. The psychological treatment will also reverse your intelligence and open-mindedness. For severe cases, such as yours, the transformation process may be long and difficult, but your loyalty will be worth it in the end.**

**You will return to class after a duration of five minutes.**

**Remember... BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU!**

---

**YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR THOUGHTCRIME AGAINST  
THE INSTITUTION OF THE SCHOOL.**

**Attention (Student's name):**

**For the entirety of the past week you have been under surveillance by a spy for the Thought Police posing as a fellow comrade English student. Your disloyalty to the Party has been made known.**

**For your outcries against your school, schoolwork, and school leaders, you are hereby arrested and will undergo extensive psychological treatment to cure you of your ailment. Once the rigorous torture and brainwashing is complete, it will be found that you are incurable. You will not be released back into your scholarly society.**

**YOU WILL BE VAPORIZED. You will not return to English class today. Enclosed is a library pass for you to engage in silent reading or research for your paper on *1984*.**

**Remember... BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU!**