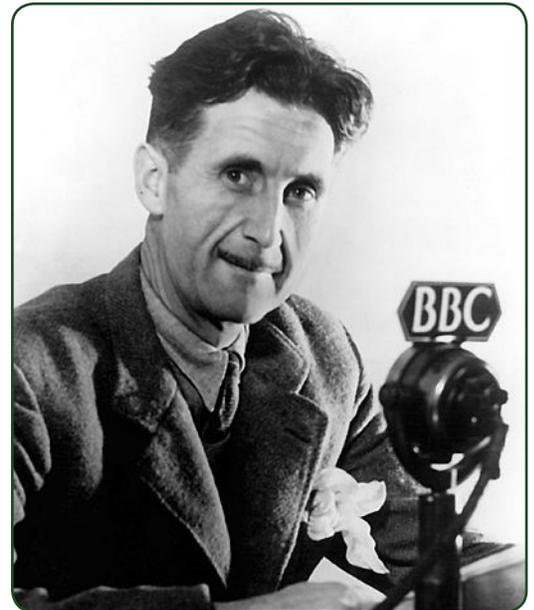


5 Days with George Orwell

**Informational
Texts
and
Activities**
Grades 7-9



Pre-Reading Activity for "A Short Biography of George Orwell"

Vocabulary Work

The following words or phrases appear in the four-part essay on George Orwell. Define what you believe they mean, keeping in mind the context of what you will be reading.

Part 1 - Young George Orwell

1. landed gentry

Part 2 - The Writer Emerges

2. political systems

3. "the establishment"

4. caste system

Part 3 - Orwell's Working Years

5. fascists

6. anarchist

7. socialism

Part 4 - Orwell's Legacy

8. dystopia

9. allegory

10. communism

11. "Big Brother"

1. Young George Orwell (aka Eric Blair)

Briefly describe three things you expect to learn about George Orwell's early years by reading the text below:

George Orwell is known as one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. His works are still widely read today and his best known novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are studied in schools all over the world. Both novels had considerable political impact after WWII.

Who *was* George Orwell? The writer used a pseudonym – his real name was Eric Arthur Blair and he took his penname, Orwell, from a river in eastern England. He lived a comparatively short life, and most of it in Britain. Orwell was born in 1903 in India to an English civil servant, Richard Walmesley Blair, and Ida Lamouzin, whose father was French. The Blairs came from landed gentry but were not wealthy.

When he was a baby, his mother took her children to England to live near London. Eric's father, working in India, visited occasionally but was mostly absent during his son's early childhood. His father retired when Eric was still young, and returned to England to live with his family, but father and son were never close.

Young Eric was sickly and had problems with his lungs. He spent a lot of time alone and developed imaginary worlds to offset his isolation. Eric's happiness did not improve when he was sent to boarding school. Most boys from his background went away to school at a young age. The Blairs must have found it difficult to pay the tuition, but it would have been unthinkable for a family from their social class not to send him to a private school. Fortunately, Eric was bright enough to win a partial scholarship.

The young boy was not happy at school. He retreated farther into his own world, spending a lot of time alone reading. His high intelligence meant that he was able to win a scholarship to Eton for high school, the most prestigious school in Britain.

Later in life the author George Orwell stated that he wanted to be a writer from the time he was five or six. At the age of seventeen he decided that he should give up the idea, as he felt it was isolating him socially and that he had not written anything of value. Eric had no way of knowing how influential his writing would one day be!

After reading the passage "Young George Orwell", answer the questions below:

1. Which events described in the passage do you think influenced George Orwell as a writer?

2. List two things you read in the passage that you were surprised to learn about George Orwell:

3. Why would childhood experiences be important to someone who writes novels? _____

4. Would you agree that Orwell probably felt isolated as a child? Support your answer with examples.

5. The passage is a biographical text. Name three common features of most biographical texts.

Language Use:

Explain what you think is meant by the following phrases or expressions used in the passage:

Paragraph 2: *civil servant*

Paragraph 4: *offset his isolation*

2. The Writer Emerges

After reading the title, what do you predict the passage below is about?

George Orwell (still known in his world as Eric Blair) found his teenage years hard to navigate. He became a confirmed member of the Anglican Church but never took religion very seriously. He wanted to be popular but was neither athletic enough, or in his mind, good looking enough. Eric became a cynical rebel and did not endear himself to his teachers or most of his classmates. He had a few close friends who were similar to him in outlook but for the most part, the other boys had little to do with him.

While at Eton Eric also began to be more critical of his parents whom he thought were just plain dull. His critical eye would eventually be reflected in his astute observations of political systems but as an adolescent he found the world a cold and hypocritical place. He had little respect for the boys he attended school with – the boys who were expected to take their place as leaders in British society. From a young age, Eric was out of sync with the “establishment”.

At the age of eighteen Eric graduated from Eton and although it was expected he would go on to university he decided instead to follow family tradition. He joined the civil service. He went to Burma, where his mother’s family had lived. Burma (now Myanmar) was a British colony at the time and Blair became part of its Imperial police force. He stayed for about five years and he would later write about his experiences.

By 1928, only twenty years old, Blair decided to pursue his early ambition of becoming a writer. During his time in Burma, he had been appalled at the caste system that prevented him from mingling freely with the ethnic Burmese. When he returned home, Blair decided to experience poverty and social marginalization firsthand. He dressed in ragged clothes and went to live in the East End, the poorest area of London, in low-rent lodgings. He wandered the country roads of England as an unemployed beggar. Blair then went to Paris doing low level jobs in hotels and restaurants. Within a few years he had written a memoir, aptly titled *Down and Out in Paris and London*, using the pseudonym of George Orwell.

After reading the passage “The Writer Emerges”, answer the questions below:

1. The writer of the passage calls the young Orwell a “cynical rebel”. Explain what you think this means.

2. Why do you think Orwell did not fit in during his years in school?

3. Young George Orwell was very bright but chose to join the civil service rather than go to university. Why do you think he made that choice?

4. After reading the passage, what would you say was one of Orwell’s dominant personality traits? Give an example or two to support your answer.

Language Use:

List four adjectives that would describe George Orwell’s life before 1928 and four that would describe it after he returned home from Burma in 1928.

Provide synonyms for each of the words below which appear in “The Writer Emerges”.

outlook _____

astute _____

respect (noun) _____

expected _____

mingling _____

marginalization _____

aptly _____

3. Orwell's Working Years

After reading the title, what do you predict the passage below is about?

In 1933 Orwell's first book, a memoir to his life of poverty, was published in 1933. He adopted a penname in order to avoid embarrassing his family. His first book was soon followed by *Burmese Days*, a memoir of his days in British colonial Asia. It appeared in 1934 and from then on Orwell was regarded as a successful political writer.

At the end of 1936 Orwell, newly married, left for Spain with his wife Eileen. Spain was embroiled in a civil war between the democratically elected Republicans and the fascists, who wanted power. Europe was heading into its dark days of rising fascism and ultimately, WWII. Orwell, who had considered himself an anarchist, began to find the tenets of socialism more attractive. He joined the Republican militia in Spain. While Orwell was in Spain, his third book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, was published. This book reflected his new found views on socialism. The author did not ever support communism; in fact he detested that particular political system.

While in Spain, Orwell was injured in the throat and arm during a battle and then had to quickly leave the country because he and his wife were to be indicted for treason. The author, whose voice would always bear traces of the injury, escaped Spain before the charges were laid and he and Eileen returned safely to England. Unfortunately, he was soon diagnosed with tuberculosis. Orwell had suffered from poor health since he was a child and his lungs were weak. When WWII began, he was willing to fight with Britain against the Germans, but the army refused him on the grounds of his poor health.

Not finding a spot in the British armed forces, Orwell applied for a job at the British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC) and secured a job as director of the bureau in India. Many of his experiences with the BBC, such as how government entities decide what information should be released and which kept hidden from the public, inspired parts of his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell resigned from his BBC position to work on his next novel, *Animal Farm*. He and his wife applied to adopt a baby. Before this came about they were bombed out of their home in London, and moved to the north of England to escape the German air raids. Soon they were able to adopt a baby, whom they named Richard after George's father. Sadly, in 1945, Eileen died while in surgery and the grief weakened Orwell's health.

After reading the passage "Orwell's Working Years", answer the questions below:

1. What events in Orwell's adult life did you read about in the passage that you think influenced his writing?

2. What do you think you might read about in Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, his "memoir to a life of poverty"?

3. In the 1930's, how did Orwell express his political views?

4. What is the main idea of the fourth paragraph? What is the purpose of this paragraph?

5. What important events occurred in Orwell's life in 1945?

Language Use:

Define the following terms or phrases from the passage in your own words:

Paragraph 2: *tenets of socialism*

Paragraph 5: *grief weakened Orwell's health*

4. Orwell's Legacy

In recent years, Orwell's wife Eileen has been given credit for helping the author develop the premise for *Animal Farm* and supporting him in his work. Although Orwell is said to have had a chauvinistic view of women, he missed his late wife terribly and his grief made his own precarious health worse. He continued to suffer from tuberculosis, which in those days was treated mainly by rest and isolation.

Animal Farm, published in 1945, the same year his wife died and WWII ended, was a literary success and Orwell was finally able to support himself through his writing. The reading public was entertained and enlightened by the allegory centered on an everyday English farm where the political antics of humans are played out mainly through animal leaders – two pigs that are said to represent Josef Stalin and Leon Trotsky. The novel was an unflattering look at communism in the mid-twentieth century.

Only four years after *Animal Farm* was published, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared. It was another political novel, but this time with humans as the protagonists. The political setting of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cut closer to the bone for its readers, as they could not ignore the reality of the dark politics of their time, the cold war era. It may have been easier to deal with imaginary pigs in a farmyard than actual humans living under "Big Brother" (a phrase Orwell has given to the English language)!

Unfortunately George Orwell's health would never recover and he died in January 1950. Shortly before his death he married his editor, Sonia Brownell, who inherited his estate and managed his legacy until her death in 1980, when she died penniless. Orwell's adopted son Richard, only six when his father died, was raised by the author's older sister and has rarely spoken about his famous parent.

Although Orwell is considered a political writer, one who created dystopian worlds in order to show the weaknesses of human systems, his own politics were often questioned. He grew up in a privileged minority class. He lived among the poor for a time, but was also known to have looked down on their living conditions and habits. He was a socialist but his own works revealed the dangers of socialism and communism. In the end though, Orwell would be recognized the world over for his two most famous works – *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which revealed to their readers in an imaginative way how political systems have an important affect on the lives of individuals.

After reading the passage "Orwell's Legacy", answer the questions below:

1. What information did you read in the passage that was new to you?

2. How do you think writing might have helped Orwell express his political views?

3. Give an example from the passage where the writer is expressing an opinion rather than presenting facts.

4. Why do you think Orwell is regarded as one of the great writers of the 20th century?

5. What aspect of George Orwell's life would you like to know more about? Why?

Express Yourself:

A "legacy" is what someone leaves behind for others. What do you think is George Orwell's legacy?

A Short Biography of George Orwell

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Eton College, which Orwell attended in his teens.

While at Eton Eric also began to be more critical of his parents whom he thought were just plain dull. His critical eye would eventually be reflected in his astute observations of political systems but as an adolescent he found the world a cold and hypocritical place. He had little respect for the boys he attended school with – the boys who were expected to take their place as leaders in British society. From a young age, Eric was out of sync with the “establishment”.

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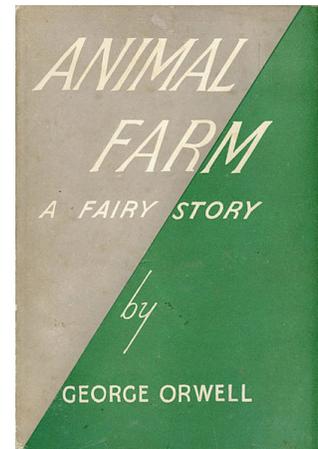


George Orwell, while employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation

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A first edition copy of Animal Farm.

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This simple gravestone, with George Orwell's original legal name, marks his resting place in Sutton Courtenay, England. He died in 1950.

A Short Biography of George Orwell

Short essay questions:

1. After reading “A Short Biography of George Orwell” discuss what you believe are the two important influences on the author’s career as a writer. Show how his early life might have related to what happened later in his life.
2. What is the difference between fact and opinion when writing a biography or a biographical sketch? What should a biography writer do when expressing opinions about his or her subject?
3. Do you think “A Short Biography of George Orwell” offers more opinions or more facts? Do you think more of one or the other would have made the passage more interesting? Support your answer with examples.
4. What is the writer of the passage’s purpose in discussing Orwell’s life as a boy? Explain why you think that is the purpose.
5. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* belongs to the fictional genre of dystopia. What advantages do you think an author might have using a dystopian setting for a novel?
6. Biographies are a study of one person’s life by another individual. In many cases, the writer never knew their subject personally. What sources of information can a biographer use to find out more about their subject?
7. Do you know more about the author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* now than you did before you read “A Short Biography of George Orwell”? List two things that you didn’t know about the writer that you found interesting and gives you a better understanding of the kind of man he was.