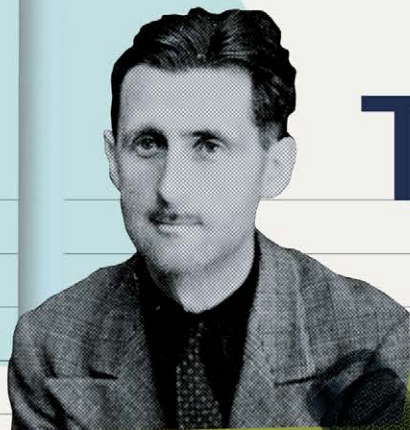




BEING A JOURNALIST:



Then &
now



A learning resource

UCL SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Who was George Orwell?

George Orwell was a writer of huge influence and impact both in the UK and beyond. He was born in 1903 (his real name was Eric Blair) and although he only lived to the age of 46, he produced an unforgettably powerful body of work as an author and journalist. He is perhaps best known for his two novels *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. Both wildly popular at the time of publishing and since then, *Animal Farm* has been translated into at least 70 other languages and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has had an immeasurable impact on storytelling and Western culture.

Do you recognise any of the excerpts below?

“

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.”

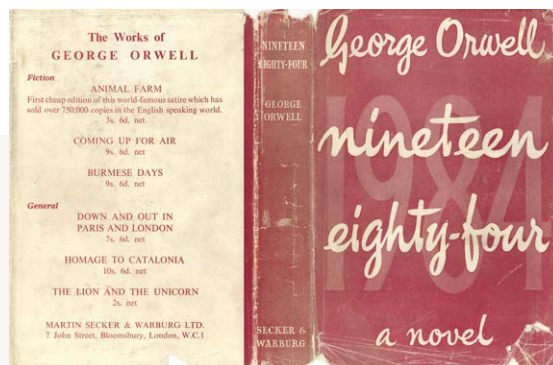
—Excerpt from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

“

“Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the pop-holes. With the ring of light from his lantern dancing from side to side, he lurched across the yard, kicked off his boots at the back door, drew himself a last glass of beer from the barrel in the scullery, and made his way up to bed, where Mrs. Jones was already snoring.

As soon as the light in the bedroom went out there was a stirring and a fluttering all through the farm buildings. Word had gone round during the day that old Major, the prize Middle White boar, had had a strange dream on the previous night and wished to communicate it to the other animals.”

—Excerpt from *Animal Farm*



The dustjacket from the first edition from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949



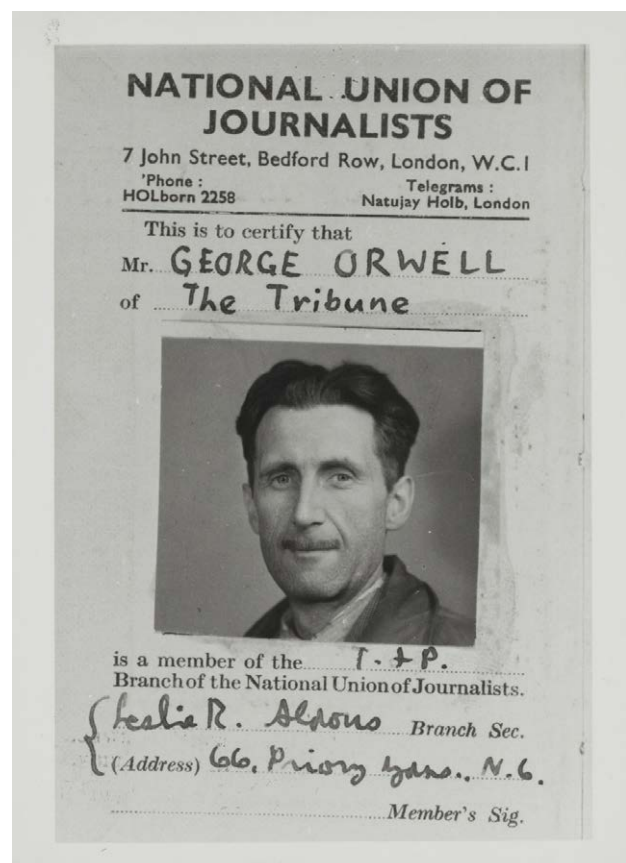
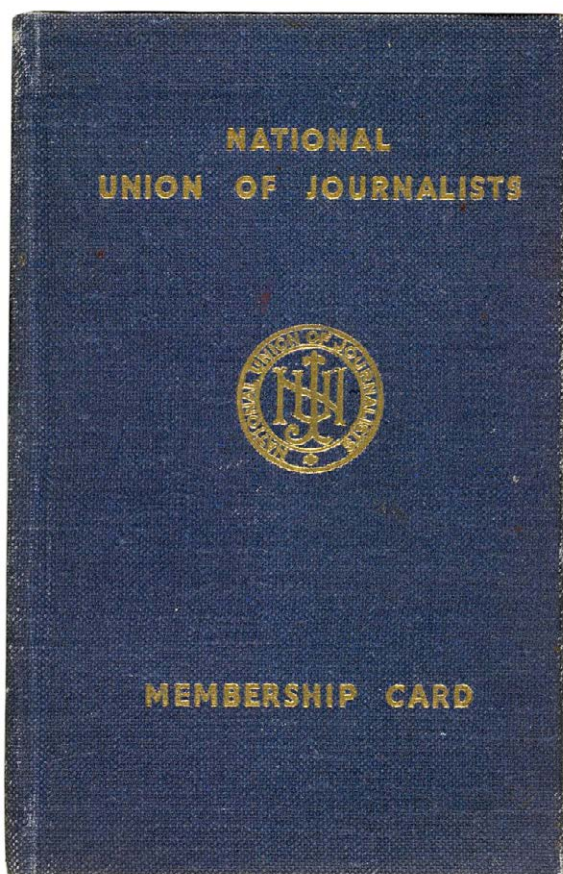
First edition dust jacket of *Animal Farm* in Vietnamese

His work was heavily influenced by his political beliefs, whether he was writing fiction, journalism or material for the radio (he worked for the BBC World Service during the Second World War). This sometimes got him into hot water or presented problems; it took him two years to get Animal Farm published!

I am writing a little squib which might amuse you when it comes out, but it is so not O.K. politically that I don't feel certain in advance that anyone will publish it. Perhaps that gives you a hint of its subject.

(ORWELL/G/2/15/1)

But this resource isn't focusing on Orwell's famous fiction writing – have a look at the next archive item.



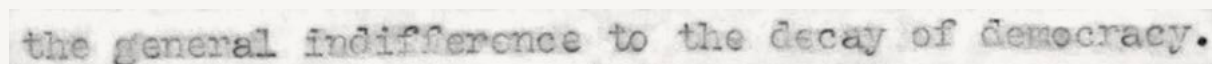
Orwell's 'NUJ' card
(ORWELL/J/26)

➔ What does this document tell us about Orwell's writing career?

Orwell was an avid reporter on the world around him. But to find out more about the subjects and situations that he wrote about and why, we need to dig a lot deeper...

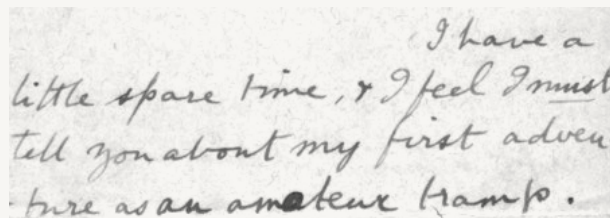
➔ Look at these excerpts from his diaries, photographs and letters held in the Orwell Archive at UCL. What do they tell you about his life?

Tip: reading archives can sometimes require patience. Don't be put off by handwriting that might be a little difficult to read or faint text – read each excerpt twice, first relying on the words that you can work out easily. Then the second time you read it you'll find most of the other words become clear.



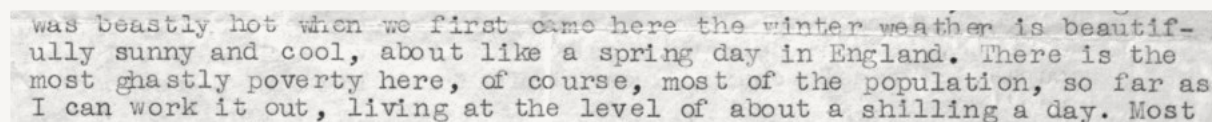
the general indifference to the decay of democracy.

(ORWELL/G/2/22)



I have a little spare time, & I feel I must tell you about my first adventure as an amateur tramp.

(ORWELL/G/2/8)



was beastly hot when we first came here the winter weather is beautifully sunny and cool, about like a spring day in England. There is the most ghastly poverty here, of course, most of the population, so far as I can work it out, living at the level of about a shilling a day. Most

(ORWELL/G/2/20)

These are excerpts from letters that Orwell wrote to friends and people he knew in the publishing industry. Do you get a sense of his approach to exploring new places as a journalist and writer? Can you identify some of the things that he cared about from these tiny pieces of writing?

➔ Let's dig a little deeper and look at photographs and manuscript excerpts from the archive.

SECTION B

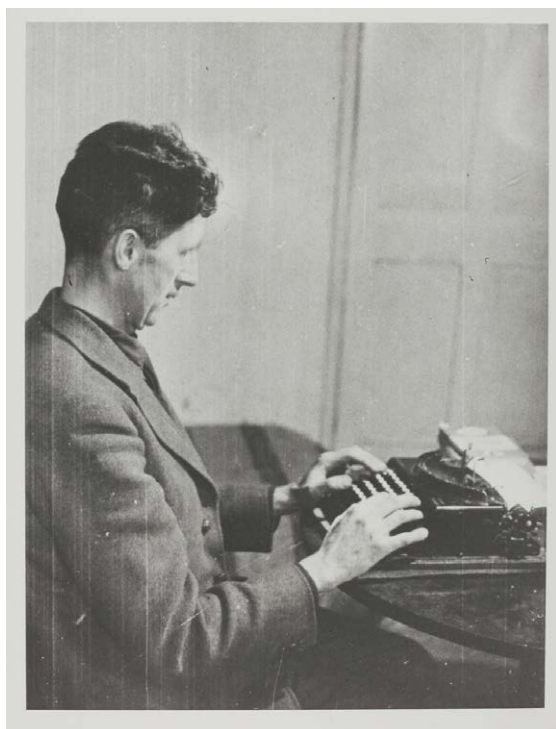
Orwell as a writer and journalist

When we first start learning about someone's writing, it often helps to explore who they were as a person. We might ask:

- When and where was he born?
- What kind of childhood do you think he had?
- Where did he live?
- Where did he go to school?
- Was he married?
- What major changes or events did he experience?
- How did he earn a living?
- What interested him as a writer? When did he die?

Each one of these snippets and photographs from the archive tell us something about Orwell, his life and his work.

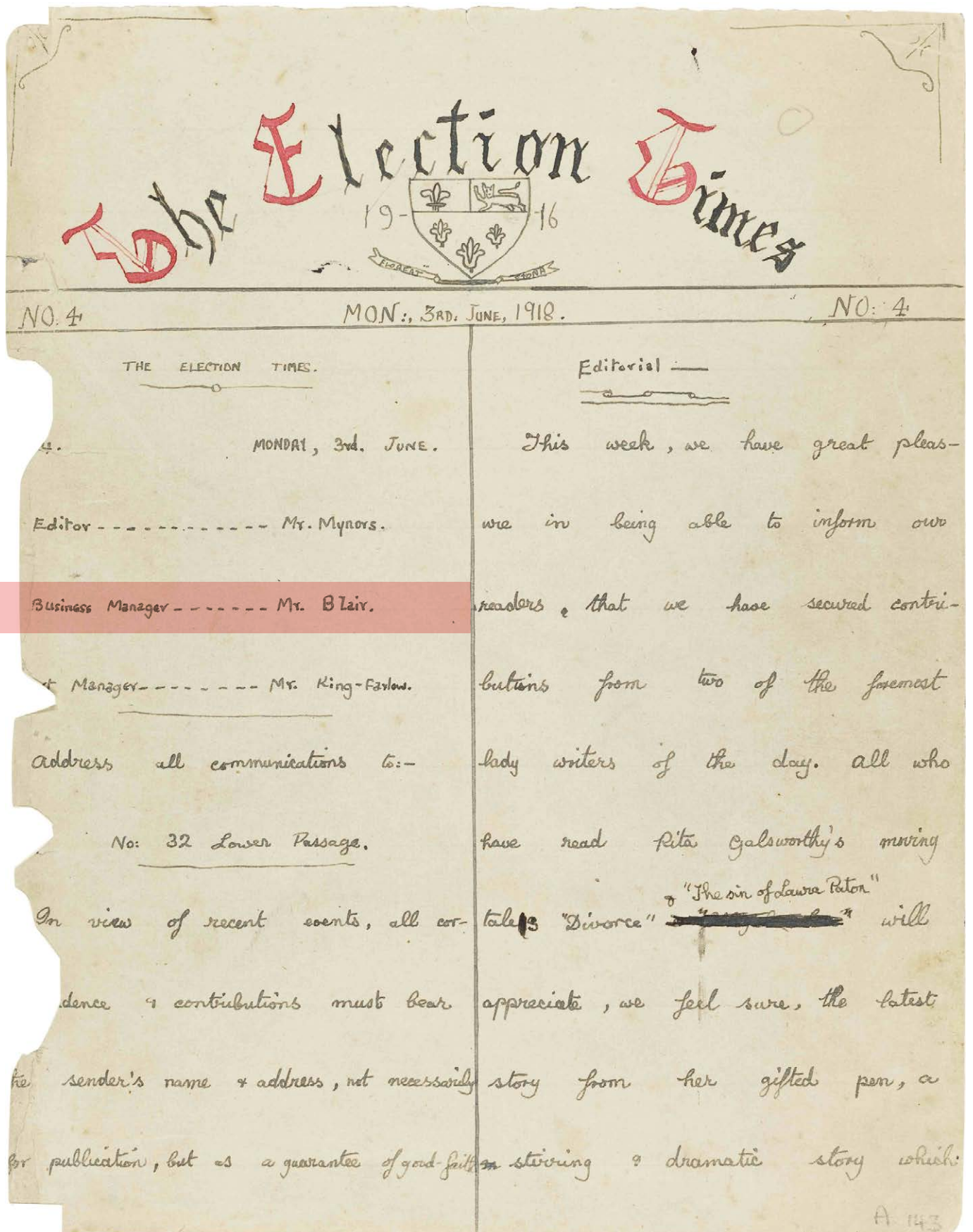
➔ Look at each closely and see what you can discover:



Orwell at work
(ORWELL/T/2/E/6)



(ORWELL/T/2/E/31)



Page one of 'The Election Times' - the Eton magazine. See 'Mr Blair' (Orwell's real name) listed as 'Business Manager' (ORWELL/A1/C)

4.

17

~~this room~~ were always open, & there was generally a fire in the grate, so that a current of air flowed through the room. And this wind, mingled with cigar smoke, seemed to me like a wind from another land, bearing with ^{it} the names of far off dusty places. When I came in to the room, & stayed quiet for awhile, my father would talk to me sometimes, & tell me the simple stories of the rubbish that lay about here & there; empty cartridge cases, bad rupees, or dried up peacock feathers. My mother often threatened to "do out" this room, but refrained, probably from mere laziness.

My father & I might have been called friends. The reticence that lies between all blood relatives held us apart, & then I had scarcely seen him till I was thirteen years old. Still, in the family

*Typescript of section of draft
of 'Burmese Days' 1A*

Biographical Fragment. George Orwell.

I was born in Buckinghamshire in 1890. My father was an Indian civil servant, and met and married my mother in 1882 in India, where she had gone to stay with an aunt for the cold weather. In '83 my father was sent to Burma on some job or other, and there in '84 my brother was born and died, aged seven months. My eldest sister was born in '85, and my second in '88. In that year my mother went home, bringing her two daughters, aged two and a half, and four months. In '89 my father came home on leave, and I was born early the next year.

I saw my father twice in the next ten years, for about six months at a time. In 1903 he retired, and died very suddenly at the end of 1908.

Before 1900 I do not remember much except odd incidents and patches of existence, some of which remain in my mind more clearly than what happened yesterday. After 1900 my recollections become pretty continuous.

My father was rather like myself, only taller, thinner and with more colour in his face. He always had a rather harassed look, except when he was sitting in his library, where my mother seldom penetrated. The atmosphere of this room was quite unlike that of any other room in the house. There were perhaps a thousand books in it, many of them books about Hindu mythology, or about fishing, shooting or travelling in India. I cannot say that I ever read any of these books, but I remember often turning over their pages and looking at strange pictures of people hanging upon hooks, or elephants composed of maidens in extraordinary postures, and wondering vaguely about them in my own mind. I never troubled to enquire their real significance, for the anxious curiosity of children is not very intelligent.

My father used to sit reading these books, with his white shirt open at the neck, smoking cigars from Dindigul. The chairs in the room were of wicker work, such as one finds in India, and there were two faded tiger skins upon the floor. On the walls were old yellow photographs, and a few eastern weapons, among



*Above: Orwell as a baby, held by his nanny.
In India, where he was born (ORWELL/T/2/A/1)*

Right: Orwell aged 3 (ORWELL/T/2/A/5)





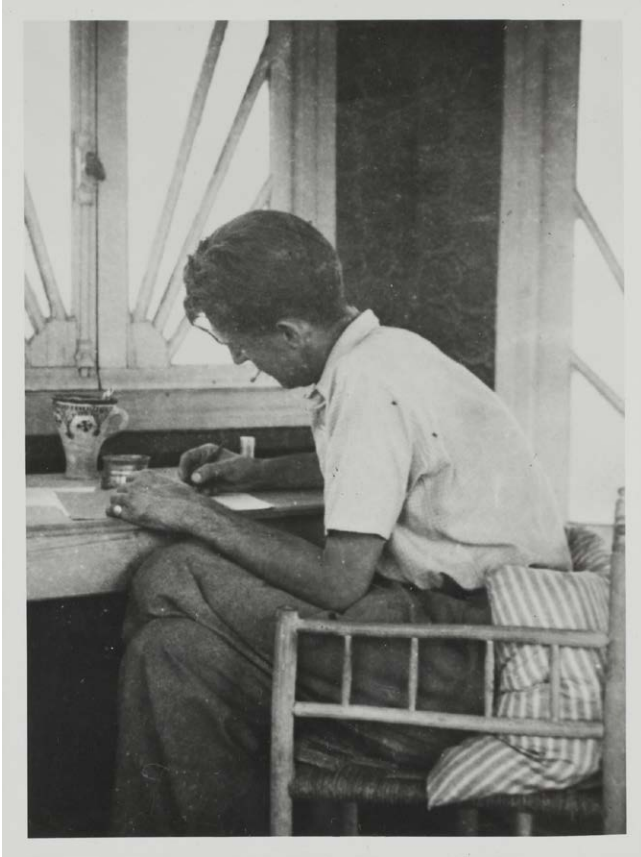
Orwell with classmates at Eton College (circa 1918 or 1919), where he attended on scholarship (ORWELL/T/2/B/26)



Copy of College Team photograph, taken in front of the door in the wall at Eton on St Andrew's Day, captioned "The Eton Wall Game" (circa 1921) (ORWELL/T/2/B/21)



Copy of group photograph showing Orwell (third from left, back row) at the Police Mess, Mandalay, Burma (known as Myanmar today) (ORWELL/T/2/B/25)



Left: Orwell in Morocco (ORWELL/T/2/D/16)

Below: Orwell and a servant caring for a goat (ORWELL/T/2/D/18)





Above: Orwell and a motorcycle
(ORWELL/T/2/D/32)

Right: Orwell in Wallington Churchyard, standing
with his back to the north wall of St Mary's church
(ORWELL/T/2/D/22)





Above: Orwell in the Home Guard (Orwell is at the back, far right) (ORWELL/T/2/D/33)



Orwell's first wife, Eileen (ORWELL/T/3/B/1/12)



Sonia, Orwell's second wife (foreground) (ORWELL/T/3/B/2/3)



Top: Cottage in Wallington where Orwell lived, 1936 – 1946 (ORWELL/T/4/A/4/3)

Left: Orwell's home on the island of Jura, Scotland. He lived there between 1946 and 1949 until his illness with tuberculosis and subsequent death (ORWELL/T/4/A/6/1)

➔ **How do you think these experiences affected and influenced Orwell when he became a journalist?**

So many of Orwell's choices as a writer can be traced back to his experiences growing up, living in different environments and developing relationships with the people around him – both in terms of *what* he wrote about and *how* he wrote about them.

Close reading

We have chosen a particularly well known and influential piece of writing from Orwell for this resource, but you could read any journalistic piece written by Orwell and find the same strong principles and approaches to exploring an idea or topic. Let's see if we can work out what those are.

'Shooting an Elephant'

This piece was published in 1936 in a magazine called *New Writing*. It recounts an experience of his in Myanmar (then referred to as Burma) when he worked for the British Colonial Police. When you are reading this piece, try to think about the different groups of people Orwell describes and the power balance between them – where is Orwell positioned in this dynamic?

Please be aware that there are some upsetting scenes described in *'Shooting an Elephant'*, including violence and racism.

Follow this link to read it, and look for evidence of the following four themes:

1. Power Dynamics
2. Building Personality
3. Brutal Honesty
4. Powerful, Uncomplicated Statements

Try to note down a few examples for each theme, then compare them with the excerpts we have chosen below.

1. Power Dynamics

The whole piece of writing acts as an illustration of one man caught between powerful forces, many of which are external and out of the narrator's control: his employer the British Colonial Police force and other 'Anglo-Indian officials'; the wider British Empire; local Burmese people; the elephant owner; and Orwell's own moral and practical reasoning. They act as powerful antagonists that push and pull the narrator's own sense of autonomy – at times it seems like he is powerless to resist. For example;

- He is doing a job he hates; 'As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear.'
- He makes it clear that he has to internalise and keep silent about where his loyalties lie at all times; 'secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.'



- The expectations of a white authoritative man (such as Orwell in this situation) are described as being so powerful as to overcome a man's internal fear of any given situation; 'A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened.'
- Orwell uses the metaphor of a mask to describe how the expectations of being an authoritative figure in Colonial Burma changed him and others like him; 'He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.'
- He does not feel able to resist the will of the crowd; 'suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly.'

2. Building Personality

In order to keep his readers interested and willing to read descriptions of such upsetting and unpleasant events, he needs to encourage them to invest some feeling – empathy, in particular – towards the narrator from whom they are hearing. Despite the fact that Orwell describes himself thinking, feeling and doing some despicable things in this piece, he successfully makes the reader care about him from the very outset;

- He uses casual language so that you feel he is just a 'normal' young man without pretences; 'I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better.'
- He makes sure that you understand he is a young adult who knew little of life and the world; 'I was young and ill-educated' – this is despite having had a highly prized private education, which he implies here did little to prepare him for his life. In what ways do you think his Eton education had failed to prepare him for the situation he describes in this piece?
- He shares weaknesses with the reader that the outside world would not suspect; 'Honestly, I was a poor shot with a rifle.', 'I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool.'
- He admits that a defining motivating factor for him is his fear of being ridiculed or humiliated; 'And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.'



3. Brutal Honesty

Orwell's willingness to describe such harrowing events and to reveal his own appalling thoughts and feelings in the moment sets him apart from many other writers of the time. It seems that his intention is to expose more significant ideas about empire and exploitation, rather than to make himself look successful or 'good' in the readers' eyes. This can sometimes be shocking;

- He admits that his time in Burma fostered a hatred for both local people and his own colleagues and fellow British representatives, and he does this with disturbing frankness; 'With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts.'
- He describes the elephant's death compassionately, referring to its age and frailty in the moment; 'climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping.'
- He contrasts to this the brutality in his own desperation and lack of expertise as he attempts to put the elephant out of its misery; 'I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole' – 'I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise.'
- He admits that, despite his pity for the death of the local Burmese man, he was secretly pleased that the elephant had killed him as it justified his decision to kill the elephant and distracted from the real reason he killed it – to avoid being humiliated. There is an element of shame in the last sentence; 'I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.'

4. Powerful, Uncomplicated Statements

Orwell is well known for the directness in his writing, and he uses direct, short phrases and sentences to drive home important points about injustice and discrimination in this piece;

- He notes flippantly that; 'The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing.'
- He notes that the younger Europeans felt that; 'an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie'. His use of the word 'damn' suggests this is the language those Europeans would have used to casually make such a discriminative statement.



- He states very clearly that the elephant no longer posed a threat to the village, making its killing seem even more unnecessary; 'He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach.'

➔ **What do you think Orwell's intention is in this piece of writing?**

Perhaps he is looking for sympathy for his own experiences? Or is he hoping to strengthen the cause for the Burmese people? He could be looking to criticise imperialism or the British Empire more specifically, or it could be a more personal criticism of the Europeans with whom he works in Burma.



Further Reading and Watching

If you would like to read another example of Orwell's journalistic writing, we recommend 'A Hanging' – [read it here](#). We also recommend that you watch our short film that features current-day journalists speaking about their own and Orwell's experiences.

[Watch film here.](#)

Each of these two pieces of writing revolve around the depiction of a violent death, but in our short film Stephen Armstrong describes the writing as 'brilliant' and 'beautiful'. **Why do you think Stephen says this?**

➔ **According to what you have read, which of these statements do you think are true and which do you think are false?**

Orwell tries to write the truth even if it is uncomfortable to read.

Orwell clearly doesn't believe in what he is writing.

Orwell questions the behaviour and intentions of other people.

Orwell has very set, unchanging opinions, which he knows to be right.

Orwell's narrative style is verbose and long-winded, and it is not always easy to untangle what he is trying to say.

Orwell questions his own behaviour and intentions.

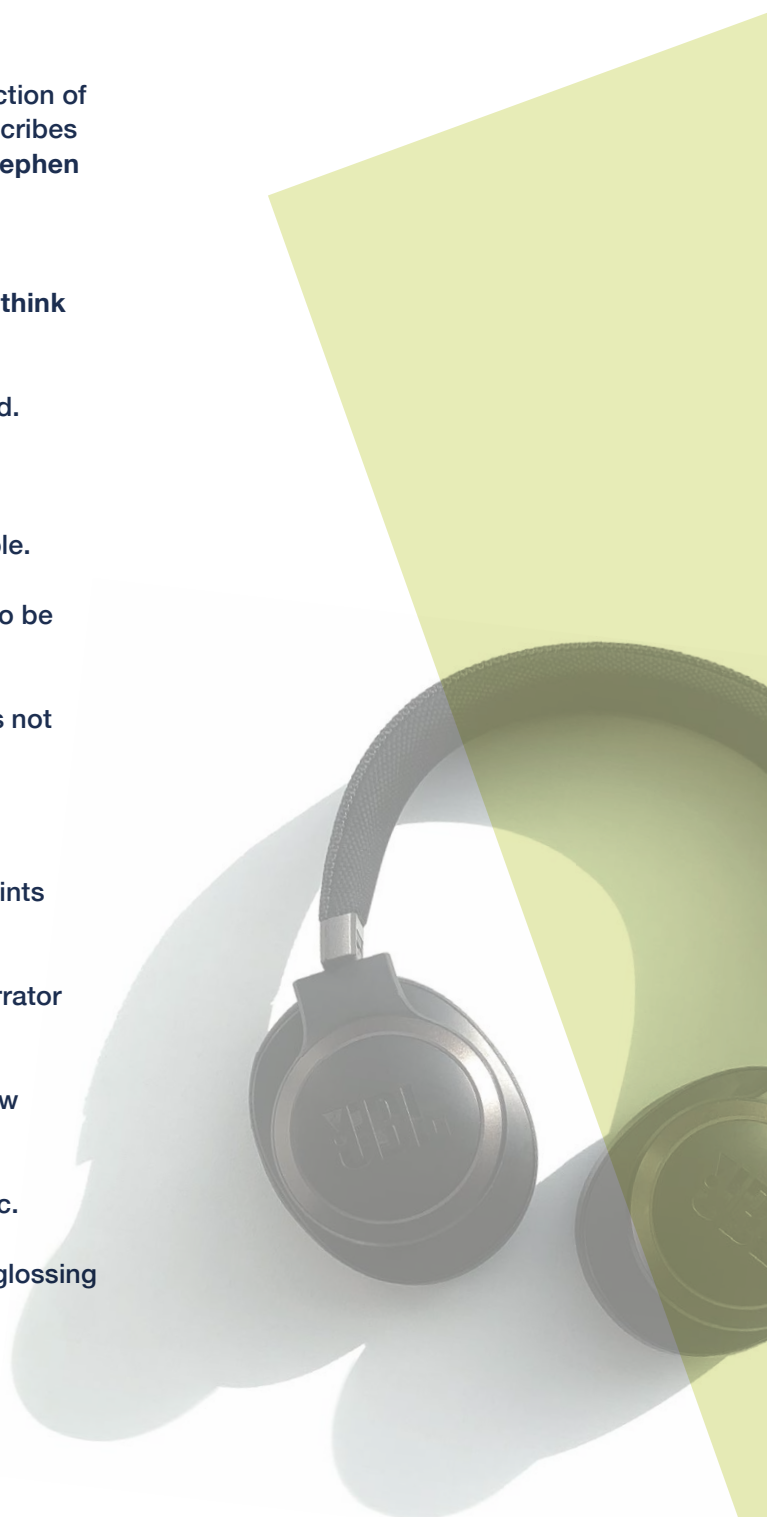
Orwell has an economical writing style and he makes his points clearly.

Orwell is confident in presenting himself as an uncertain narrator who is not always sure what to think.

Orwell is keen to uphold the status quo and not question how things are done.

Orwell's writing is powerful because his voice feels authentic.

Orwell tries to make his writing as palatable as possible by glossing over uncomfortable realities.



Politics and the English Language

Some people have been so taken with Orwell's style that they have used his ideas to train future journalists – even today! Take a look at this piece called 'Politics and the English Language'.

➔ What do you think Orwell is trying to say in the excerpt below?

“

'A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.'

—Excerpt from *Politics and the English language*

He felt strongly that; 'staleness of imagery' and a 'lack of precision' were the results of this 'slovenliness' – Orwell explains that this causes the writer to not be able to express their thoughts properly, potentially accidentally saying something else entirely.

To put an end to this kind of writing, he suggests 'six' rules:

“

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

➔ Try looking at a current day newspaper article and see if you think the journalist has followed these rules. Do they describe things clearly, efficiently and without jargon? Do you think the writer has used clichéd metaphors, similes or figures of speech that are used too often?

This essay (originally published in 'Horizon' in 1946) was given to every new recruit of the Observer newspaper by its editor, David Astor. He was editor from 1948 to 1975, so that's a lot of new journalists who were given Orwell's thoughts on good writing!

Your own writing

Let's look at your life in the same way as we did Orwell's. What people, places and experiences make up your life? How might those things influence and direct your writing?



All of Orwell's reporting is centred on things he experienced. He provides a critical and authentic commentary from the point of view of someone who really puts themselves on the ground and pays close attention to what they see.

➔ **Are there stories which you feel you could bring your own unique set of experiences and observations to?**

Could you use some of Orwell's principles about writing to tell these stories yourself?

Remember that your experiences and your voice are unique – if you can find a way to express your thoughts as clearly and artfully as Orwell, you will be an excellent writer!

JANUARY 2023

