1984 is about totalitarianism. A totalitarian government is one that tries to control every aspect of life—how people spend every minute of their time, even in private; who they can associate with; what they’re allowed to say. A totalitarian government even tries to control what people think and what they believe.

George Orwell wrote 1984 in the late 1940s. What he knew about totalitarianism was based on the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Those governments had come into being not that long before and they weren’t very well understood yet. What Orwell was trying to do with 1984 was to give his readers a clear picture of what life would be like if a free country like England were under totalitarian rule.

1984 takes place in London. The London in the book is a depressing place. There’s never enough to eat. The food’s disgusting. There aren’t enough clothes or shoes or anything to go around, and the city is pretty dilapidated—except for these giant pyramid-shaped government buildings that rise above the landscape.

There’s some sort of war going on, though no one really understands what it’s about. Rockets frequently explode in the streets and blow people to bits.
The worst part is that the government is always watching everything people do. There are these posters of Big Brother—who’s supposedly the leader of the government—that say Big Brother Is Watching You. There are Thought Police who have hidden cameras and microphones literally everywhere. The government can watch you in your home through your TV screen, and you’re not allowed to turn your TV off ever.

There are a lot of things you’re not allowed to do in this society—and if you do them the police might take you away and throw you into a forced labor camp. You’re not allowed to have close friends. You’re not allowed to be in love. You can’t date or have sex with someone you like. You’re basically supposed to save all your emotional energy for the Party—the Party being the government.

Then there are things you have to do. You have to watch the government programming on TV—most of it’s news, some of it’s exercises. You have to attend pep rallies, including this one called the Two Minutes Hate. So it’s hard to even have time to think your own thoughts because they’re constantly filling your head with propaganda.

The main character of 1984 is Winston Smith. He’s 39, he has a job in the government bureaucracy, and he lives this horrible dreary existence without any friends or anyone in his life. At the beginning of the book he starts writing a diary to talk about how much he hates life in his society, even though writing a diary is one of those things you would be killed for doing if you were caught. The diary is his place for thinking about his society. It’s a place where he tries to imagine if life could possibly be different from the way it is. There’s no way for him to know if things were ever different because the government has changed all the records of the past and rewritten all the history books.

At the beginning of the novel, there are two other people who matter to Winston, and he doesn’t even know either of them.
One of them is Julia. Julia is this attractive young woman who works in the same building as him—she’s some kind of mechanic. Winston basically hates her. He hates her because she’s pretty and he can’t have her, but he also thinks she’s the sort of person who would turn him in to the Thought Police. So he’s afraid of her but also sort of fascinated.

The other person he’s interested in is this portly guy named O’Brien, who’s a member of the Inner Party. That means he’s a boss, much higher up than Winston. Winston should be afraid of this guy, but he gets the sense that O’Brien is intelligent, so he has this yearning to be friends with him. He thinks O’Brien would understand how he feels about life.

The book takes a turn one day when Julia slips Winston a note that says “I love you.”

This note completely rocks Winston’s world. Of course he’s interested—he can’t wait to get in touch with her, but it’s very hard for them to say two words to each other in private with all these spies and cameras everywhere. Finally they do manage to get out to the country, and they start this mad love affair.

The love affair makes them both very happy. It’s dangerous, because they could be killed or sent to labor camps if they get caught. But that makes it more exciting. At last Winston has someone who understands him and who hates the Party as much as he does.

But Winston needs to go that extra step. He’s rebelling against the party privately by having the secret affair. Now he wants to go to the next level and be an active rebel against the government.

He gets his chance one day when O’Brien invites him to his apartment to look at something work-related. Winston takes a leap of faith and guesses that O’Brien must be part of the rebellion, because no one invites people
over to their home—it just isn’t done. So he and Julia go to O’Brien’s house and confess that they want to be rebels, and O’Brien says “yes, I’m a rebel too, and we all read this book that explains why things are the way they are.”

Winston reads the book, and he’s blown away by it. Unfortunately, right after he reads it, the Thought Police bust in and arrest him and Julia and carry them off to the Ministry of Love to torture them. So we learn that O’Brien wasn’t a rebel after all—he just wanted to catch Winston.

In the Ministry of Love, they torture Winston in all sorts of horrible ways. They break his bones and his teeth, they use electric shock, they starve him, and on and on. He tells them everything he knows, he confesses to everything they ask him, and he tells them everything he knows about Julia.

After torturing him over and over, O’Brien finally tells Winston what it is that the government really wants. What they want is to have total power over the minds of people like Winston. They want people like Winston to say “2 + 2 = 5” and really believe it, not just say it to avoid a beating. For the government it’s purely an exercise in power. They’re not trying to control his mind for some other purpose—they just want to exercise total power over peoples’ minds.

They finally do break Winston completely, in this place called Room 101, where they do whatever it is you’re most afraid of. They lock his face into a cage and threaten to let these rats eat their way through his face. He has a phobia of rats, so he loses it and says “do it to Julia, not me”—which is a complete betrayal of what’s most important to him. The government has taken his last shred of integrity.

After he does that, they let him and Julia go. The Thought Police don’t care about them anymore. The two of them meet on the outside, but they can’t love each other anymore.
Winston and Julia are basically broken people after they get out. Winston has changed to the point that he doesn’t even want to think about anything that might be rebellious. He just sits in a café listening to the news and smiling. The last words of the novel are “He loved Big Brother.”

So, one of the points the book makes is that a human being can be broken down completely until he’ll believe whatever you tell him—even if it’s that $2 + 2 = 5$. At the same time, the book has a positive message, which is that it’s really hard to get inside someone’s head to that extent. The government has to go to incredible lengths to brainwash Winston successfully.

For more information about *1984*, check out the SparkNote on sparknotes.com