

Writing Task 1: Entertainment as a Form of Control

Core Question: Have we become a trivial culture preoccupied with entertainment? For this writing topic, we return to where we started with the quotations from Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Here is how this module began:

In the foreword to his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, author Neil Postman notes that the year 1984 had come and gone without a fulfillment of George Orwell's dark, dystopian vision and that Americans felt satisfied that the "roots of liberal democracy had held." Big Brother was not watching, and Americans retained their autonomy, freedom, and history. The nightmare world of Big Brother was just that: a nightmare.

However, he reminds us that alongside Orwell's dark vision there was another—"slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*." In Huxley's vision, no force would be required to deprive people of their freedom. Instead, as Huxley saw it, "people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think." Postman follows these observations with a series of further oppositions comparing the two visions.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. (xix-xx)

Postman makes it clear that he thinks Huxley's vision is coming true. Postman, however, blames television for most of the problem. Today, almost thirty years later, the Internet has more influence than television, and Postman's arguments appear a bit dated. Have we avoided Huxley's vision too? Or has the Internet made Huxley's, and Postman's, vision even more likely?

After reading *Brave New World*, do you think that Postman was right? Is a constant barrage of entertainment making us passive and self-centered? Are we being controlled and conditioned by pleasure as effectively as we would be by a secret police armed with guns and nightsticks? In other words, how similar is our world to the World State depicted in *Brave New World*? And what is the trend? Are we becoming, as Postman suggests, more like *Brave New World* or less?

In answering these questions, identify some important aspects of each society that you want to compare. Then, using your notes from your reading to support your arguments,

discuss the differences and similarities between *Brave New World* and our own society on each of the aspects you have chosen. You may want to also draw some conclusions about what steps we should take to avoid problems in the future.