

# Postmodern Approaches to Truth

## Quotes of the Day:

**“Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”**

**“Reason and power are one and the same.”**

**-- philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist  
Jean-François Lyotard**

**Class participation**

**A reminder on breadth vs. depth**

**Extra/optional readings**

**Some key postmodern ideas, with the caveats that it's hard to summarize such a large body of work, and postmodernists can be hard to pin down:**

- Truth is always relative to a perspective. Can't say one perspective is right and another is wrong. No metanarratives.**
- Science is just another way of knowing, no better or worse than any other.**
- Reason and evidence are covers for the interests of a person, group, or institution.**
- Facts are created, not discovered. All facts are theory-laden.**

- To postmodernists, the central concept is power, not truth.
- Every knowledge claim is simultaneously a power grab. Power and knowledge are mutually reinforcing and inseparable (“power-knowledge”).
- Controlling language is a means of power. Free speech is an illusion; it does not exist and cannot exist.
- Like modernists, postmodernists challenge authority. Postmodernists differ in viewing authority or power as suffused throughout all of society (“the panopticon”).



- **We can only understand the world through language, which is self-referential. We can't access an underlying reality.**
- **Language is ambiguous and unstable. Slippage between the speaker or writer's intent, and what is said.**
- **Further slippage in language between the communication at hand and how the listener or reader interprets it. The result is an infinite number of interpretations, none of which is "True".**



**Social construction: something that emerged through socially contingent means and continues to exist by agreement, as opposed to being natural. Money as an example.**

**Other examples: borders, ethnicities**

- **Postmodernism: Everything about the world is socially constructed (justice, love, gender, truth, scientific concepts and theories, etc.)**
- **Words and discourses create the world. There is no outside-text.**

- **There is no such thing as progress, because it would require objective standards. Postmodernists say there are no objective standards.**
- **Whereas modernists have sought universal knowledge, rights, morality, etc., postmodernists reject anything universal and stress the subjective, local, and particular.**

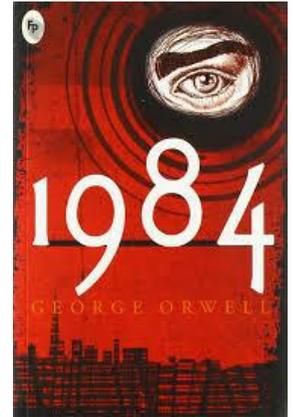
**Figuring out whether a given author or speaker is using a premodern, modern, or postmodern approach to truth (or some combination) can be challenging.**

**Smith: Nick Gillespie's version of postmodernism doesn't focus on power-knowledge, language, or subjectivity. It instead stresses the difficulty of knowledge certainty and the processes of knowledge creation, which are themes within modern writings that are developed further by postmodernists.**

**Readings for next class:**

**Much of postmodern thinking revolves around how to understand and interpret words and texts, through means different from a modern approach.**

**George Orwell, 1984**



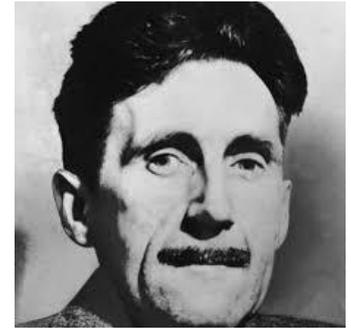
**The slogans of the Ministry of Truth in 1984, written on the side of its building:**

**War is Peace**

**Freedom is Slavery**

**Ignorance is Strength**

## George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

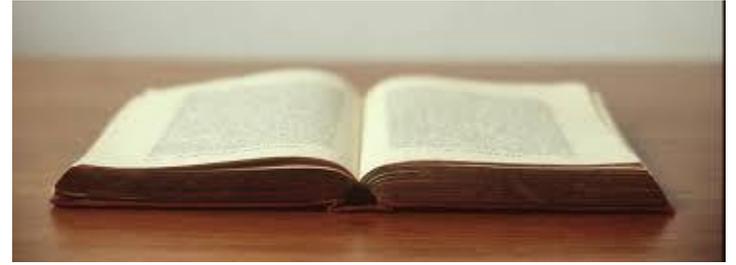


<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>

**“Each of these passages has faults of its own, but, quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not.”**

**“A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?”**

**Postmodernists take a different approach to words and texts, as illustrated in Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”**



<https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf>

**“the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text”**

**“a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)”**

**“the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture”**

**“Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing.”**

**“refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a ‘secret’: that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary”**

**“the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination”**

**“the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author”**

**Another way to see how postmodernists read texts differently than premoderns and moderns: the distinction between exegesis, from a Greek word meaning “to draw out,” and eisegesis, “to lead into.” Often used in a religious context but relevant to any textual reading.**

**Theologian Terance Espinoza: “Exegesis tries to listen to the text, and let meaning come from the text itself in its original, historical context.”**

**Pastor/author Wyman Richardson: “Eisegesis involves putting a meaning into the text by allowing our presuppositions and assumptions to shape our reading of the Bible.”**

**Premodern and modern readers uphold exegesis as their goal and condemn the practice of eisegesis.**

**To a postmodernist, exegesis is impossible. Every reading is an instance of eisegesis.**

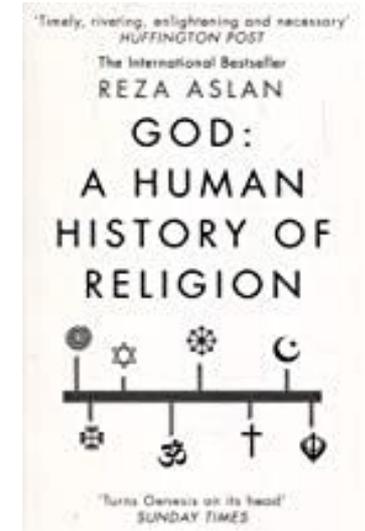
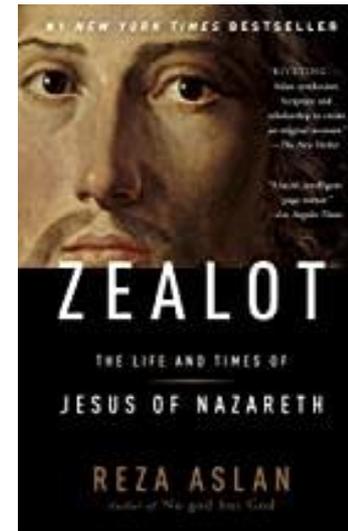
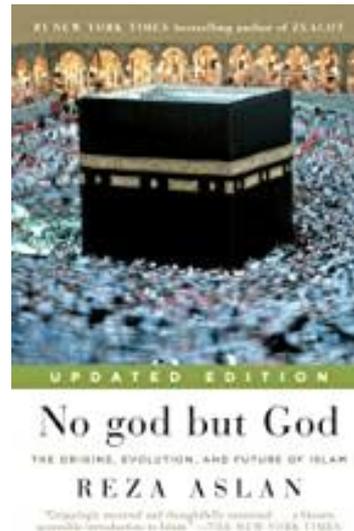
**Premodern and modern: strive for objectivity.  
Postmodern: embrace your subjectivity.**



**Literary theorist Stanley Fish says his approach to reading texts “relieves me of the obligation to be right (a standard that simply drops out) and demands only that I be interesting (a standard that can be met without any reference at all to an illusory objectivity).”**



**Reza Aslan**



## Postmodernism in Reza Aslan's interviews:

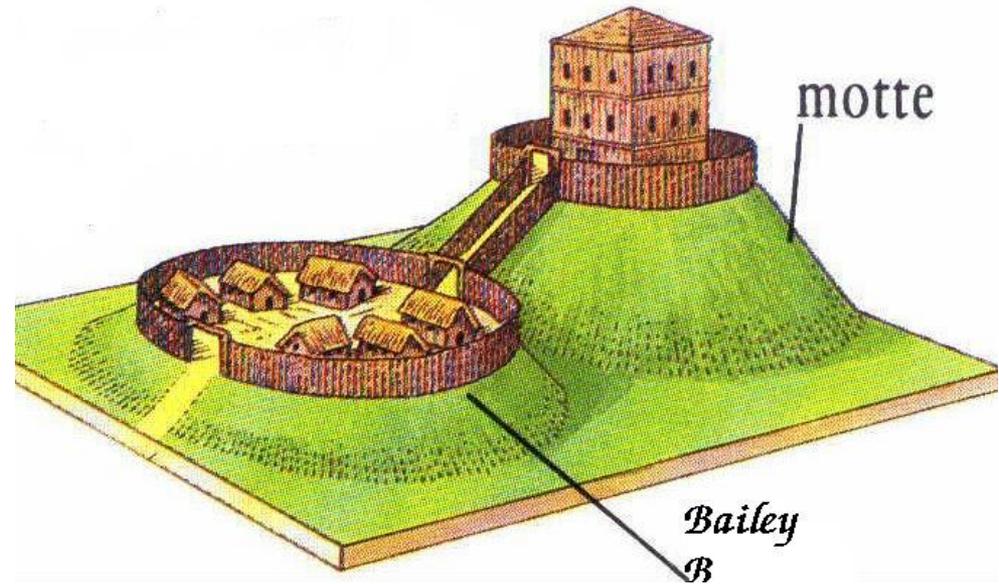
<https://www.thecut.com/2014/10/reza-aslan-on-what-the-new-atheists-get-wrong.html>

**Postmodernists apply their basic approach to everything, well beyond literary texts**

**“the world as text” (Roland Barthes)**

**academic journal *Social Text***

## motte and bailey



### motte and bailey fallacy:

A speaker makes an extreme claim. When challenged, the speaker retreats to a more modest and easily defensible claim. When the challenger goes away, the speaker returns to the original, extreme claim.

The words “All I’m saying is” can sometimes indicate the motte and bailey fallacy.

**Philosopher Nicholas Shackel: Postmodernists often commit the motte and bailey fallacy.**

**bailey: A postmodern claim**

**motte: A claim consistent with a premodern or modern approach to truth**

**Examples:**

**bailey: There is no objective reality.**

**motte: We don't have direct access to objective reality.**

**bailey: A text has an infinite number of interpretations, none of which is better than any other.**

**motte: A text has multiple plausible interpretations. A reader's own background and biases invariably affect how they understand it.**

**bailey: Mythological and traditional stories are just as valid as scientific knowledge.**

**motte: Scientific knowledge is shaped by its cultural environment.**