**SE III Speaking exam MORAL CENSORSHIP or DYSTOPIAN FICTION**

For your speaking exam in SE3 you have to work with a classmate. The two of you will read two novels (or a novel and a collection of essays) and do a host of compare and contrast exercises on them, in which you answer a number of questions. The exam starts with a 7-minute presentation on the books, based on your paper. You will then get a few statements to discuss and questions to answer, all relating to the themes of your books.

**Background information cancel culture and moral censorship.**

*Cancel culture* refers to a social phenomenon where individuals or groups are called out, criticized, or boycotted for perceived offensive actions, statements, or beliefs. This often involves public shaming, social media backlash, and sometimes even professional consequences. Cancel culture is driven by concerns for social justice and holding people accountable, but it can also lead to silencing diverse perspectives and stifling open discourse.

The link between cancel culture and book bans lies in their shared impact on free expression. In cancel culture, certain ideas or viewpoints are "canceled" due to being deemed offensive or harmful, potentially leading to the suppression of unpopular or controversial ideas. Similarly, book bans involve restricting access to certain literature based on objections to their content. Both practices can hinder intellectual growth, limit access to diverse viewpoints, and challenge the fundamental principle of free speech. However, the distinction lies in the scale: while cancel culture often focuses on individuals, book bans target entire works, exacerbating concerns about censorship and the free exchange of ideas.

**Additional themes related to cancel culture**

* Social injustice
* Race, sexuality, gender and diversity
* identity politics
* critical race theory
* discrimination
* white privilege
* cultural appropriation

**The exam**

***Step 1 Choose your novels***

Choose two works of fiction or one work of fiction and a collection of articles. As they are deemed classics of American literature, reading either *The Scarlet Letter* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* is compulsory.

Fiction:

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850).

*The Scalet Letter* is a novel set in Puritan New England and follows the story of Hester Prynne, a woman who is forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her chest as punishment for committing adultery. The novel explores themes of sin, guilt, redemption, and the consequences of societal judgment.

Hester's public humiliation and the way the community treats her can be seen as early examples of cancel culture, where individuals are socially punished for their perceived transgressions. The novel prompts reflection on the ethics and effectiveness of such punitive practices, paralleling contemporary debates around cancel culture's impact on individuals and society's role in enforcing social norms.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1961)

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, a classic of modern American literature, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a child’s view of race and justice in the Depression-era South. The book sells one million copies per year. Its primary themes are racial injustice and the destruction of innocence, but scholars have noted that Lee also addresses issues of class, courage, compassion, and gender roles in the [Deep South](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_South). Lessons from the book emphasize tolerance and decry prejudice.

Despite its themes, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned for being ‘immoral literature’ in 1966 and continues to be challenged for its use of racial [epithets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epithet). It is still one of the most commonly banned books in the United States.

*American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis (1991)

*American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is a novel that delves into the mind of Patrick Bateman, a wealthy and handsome investment banker in Manhattan who leads a double life as a sadistic serial killer. The novel explores his descent into madness, obsession with materialism, and brutal acts of violence. It is a satirical critique of consumerism, social elitism, and the superficiality of 1980s American society.

The book has been subject to controversy due to its graphic violence, explicit sexual content, and disturbing themes. While it hasn't been widely banned, it has faced challenges and restrictions in various locations due to concerns about its content. The banning or attempted banning of "American Psycho" has typically been based on objections to its explicit content, which some deem offensive, morally objectionable, or psychologically distressing.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a semi-autobiographical young adult novel, which follows the story of Arnold Spirit Jr., a Native American teenager living on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Frustrated by the limitations of his reservation's school, Arnold transfers to a predominantly white school off the reservation, navigating the challenges of cultural identity, poverty, and personal growth. The novel addresses themes of racism, poverty, friendship, and resilience, while also incorporating humour and honesty.

The book has faced challenges and bans in various school districts due to its depiction of explicit language, sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and themes of violence. Critics argue that these elements make the book unsuitable for younger readers. On the other hand, proponents of the book assert that it offers valuable insights into the experiences of marginalized communities, promotes empathy, and tackles important issues that many teenagers face. They contend that its frank portrayal of difficult topics encourages thoughtful discussion and critical thinking among students. The controversy surrounding the novel highlights the ongoing debate between the need for authentic, unfiltered narratives and concerns over age-appropriate content in educational settings.

Non-fiction:

Read the following articles and find five more of your own, from credible sources, in English or in Dutch:

[When It Comes to Banning Books, Both Right and Left Are Guilty | Opinion (newsweek.com)](https://www.newsweek.com/when-it-comes-banning-books-both-right-left-are-guilty-opinion-1696045)

[The war on words: how cancel culture is taking over the world of books | Evening Standard](https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/books/cancel-culture-authors-books-jk-rowling-b900277.html)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html?smid=wa-share>

[What is cancel culture? Why we keep fighting about canceling people - Vox](https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate)

[Yes, cancel culture is real — and it's dangerous | Washington Examiner](https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/editorials/yes-cancel-culture-is-real-and-its-dangerous)

***Step 2 Write a compare and contrast essay***

Read both fiction and non-fiction parts; then, compile an overview of your works. The questions below can serve as a jumping-off point for your overview. You could compose a thorough and coherent answer to the questions below. If a question seems appropriate for your combination of works, elaborate. If a question seems less appropriate, or you have few insights on the matter, do not go into detail as much. Rephrase the answers into a paragraph or paragraphs, so that they stand on their own.

* Illustrate your answers with **fragments** from the books or **quotes** from the articles.

1. What is cancel culture in literature?

* What is the definition of cancel culture, particularly in the context of literature?
* How has cancel culture evolved and manifested within the literary world?
* Can you provide examples of instances where authors, books, or literary works have been subjected to cancel culture? What do you think about that?

1. Impact on freedom of expression:

* To what extent does cancel culture pose a threat to freedom of expression and artistic creativity (in literature)?
* How can the desire to avoid being "canceled" influence writers/artists and their creative decisions?
* Are there legitimate concerns about self-censorship among authors due to the fear of backlash? Or any other people for that matter?

1. Intention vs interpretation:

* How should the intentions of an author be balanced against the interpretations and reactions of readers when evaluating cancel culture?
* How should the intentions of anyone posting anything online or expressing their opinion anywhere else be balanced against the interpretations and reactions of readers/listeners?
* What are the implications of readers interpreting texts in ways that the author did not intend?

1. Historical Context and Cultural Sensitivity:

* How do historical context and changing cultural norms impact our assessment of older literary works that might contain elements now seen as offensive?
* What is it in your books that is now (was ever) seen as offensive? Is it offensive to you?
* What criteria should be used to determine whether a literary work is genuinely offensive or whether it's a product of its time?

1. Author accountability:

* Should authors/artists be held accountable for their personal beliefs and actions outside of their literary work?
* Does an author's/artist’s personal background or behaviour invalidate the value of their work?
* What do you know about the authors of your books and their personal background or beliefs? Does it influence how you read their work?

1. Education and censorship:

* How does cancel culture intersect with educational curricula? Should controversial works be removed from school reading lists?
* Do you think your book is appropriate reading material? Is it necessary/educational? Why? What does it teach readers?
* What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of exposing students to texts that might be considered offensive or outdated? What were the benefits or drawbacks of reading your combination of works for you?

1. Role of social media and public opinion:

* How has the rise of social media contributed to the rapid spread of cancel culture (within the literary community)?
* Are there dangers in allowing public opinion, often fueled by social media, to dictate the fate of literary works/works of art/songs/tv-programmes/etc.?

1. Long-term impact:
   * What might be the long-term consequences of cancel culture on the literary landscape, both in terms of creativity and the way we engage with literary works?
2. Writer’s message:

* What are people taught to believe in your books?
* What, according to you, are the writers’ messages?
* What did reading these books or articles teach you?

***Step 3 Prepare your speaking exam***

Your exam starts with a 7-minute presentation, in which you tell us what reading the works and doing the follow-up exercises taught you. You can take turns presenting the insights you have on your particular combination of works. These seven minutes should be jam-packed with your personal analyses, character psychology, description of the setting, the author’s philosophy, and so on. Also, tell us which of the books (each of) you liked best and why. Your teachers have read the books as well, so instead of providing a brief or extended overview of the book, we would appreciate it if the presentation went as in-depth as one can possibly imagine. And remember, quality over quantity. A point well-made is worth so much more than three made half-heartedly.

You will then be asked to discuss a number of statements. The best way to prepare for this is to talk about the books a lot **in English**. Example statements are:

* Cancel culture can be seen as a necessary tool for holding individuals accountable for their harmful actions or statements.
* Cancel culture often focuses on individual actions, diverting attention from addressing systemic issues that require collective solutions.
* Banning books infringes on freedom of expression and limits people's access to diverse ideas and perspectives.
* Book bans often reflect societal norms and values at a particular time, and lifting bans can be a way to track societal progress.

And, if time allows, you might get some additional questions, such as:

* Did reading these work teach you anything worthwhile?
* Could you relate to the main character? Why (not)?
* Which of the characters in your books did you identify with most?
* Did you like the endings of your books? If you could change one, which would you pick and how would you change it?
* What was the most exciting or interesting fragment in your books?
* Which article, if any, voices your own opinion?

Or we might ask you to comment on a fragment we’ll show you.

***Assessment***

You will be assessed by your teacher and a colleague. They will focus on fluency, content, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

**Background information Dystopian Fiction**

**Utopian** describes a society that's conceived to be perfect. In 1516 Sir Thomas More wrote the first 'Utopia'. He coined the word 'utopia' from the Greek ou-topos meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere'. But this was a pun - the almost identical Greek word eu-topos means a good place. **Dystopian** is the exact opposite — it describes an imaginary society that is as dehumanizing and as unpleasant as possible.

**Typical features of dystopian fiction**

* A background story of war, revolution, uprising, overpopulation, natural disaster or some other climactic event which resulted in dramatic changes to society.
* A standard of living among the lower and middle class that is generally poorer than in contemporary society. This is not always the case, however, in *Brave New World* people enjoy much higher material living standards in exchange for the loss of other qualities in their lives, such as independent thought and emotional depth.
* A protagonist who questions society, often feeling intuitively that something is terribly wrong.
* As dystopian literature typically depicts events that take place in the future, it often features technology more advanced than that of contemporary society. Usually, this advanced technology is controlled exclusively by the group in power, while the oppressed population is limited to a rather primitive technology.
* Dystopian fiction typically extrapolates current trends and developments into the future. It is not enough to show people living in an unpleasant society. The society must have similarities to today, of the reader's own experience. If the reader can identify the patterns or trends that would lead to the dystopia, it becomes a more involving and effective experience.
* There is usually a group of people who are not under the complete control of the state, and in whom the hero of the novel usually puts his or her hope, although he or she still fails to change anything. In *1984* by George Orwell they are the "proles" (short for "proletariat"), in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley they are the people on the reservation, and in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, they are the "book people" past the river and outside the city.
* If destruction is not possible, escape may be, if the dystopia does not control the world. In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the main character succeeds in fleeing and finding people who have dedicated themselves to memorizing books to preserve them.

**Common themes found in dystopian novels**

* Environmental destruction
* Nuclear Disaster
* Government control
* Religious Control
* Technological Control
* Survival
* Loss of Individualism

**The exam**

***Step 1 Choose your novels***

Choose two of the following novels. Your combination should include either *Brave New World* or *1984.*

*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932)

The novel examines a futuristic society, called the World State, that revolves around science and [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency). In this society, emotions and individuality are conditioned out of children at a young age, and there are no lasting relationships because “every one belongs to every one else”. Children are created outside the womb and cloned. The embryos are provided with differing amounts of chemicals and [hormones](https://www.britannica.com/science/hormone) in order to condition them into predetermined classes. Bernard Marx, one of the main characters of the story, and his love interest Lenina Crowne, travel to a savage reservation. When the two arrive, they see people living there engaging in unfamiliar rituals and meet Linda and her son John (‘the Savage’). Marx decides to bring the two home with him.

*1984* by George Orwell (1948)

The book is set in 1984 in Oceania, one of three perpetually warring totalitarian states (the other two are Eurasia and Eastasia). Oceania is governed by the all-controlling Party, which has brainwashed the population into unthinking obedience to its leader, Big Brother. The book’s hero, [Winston Smith](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Winston-Smith), is a minor party functionary longing for truth and decency, which leads him to secretly rebel against the government. He embarks on a forbidden affair with Julia. Both of them are eventually caught and sent to the Ministry of Love for a violent reeducation.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985)

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving. Offred details her life starting with her third assignment as a Handmaid to one such Commander. Interspersed with her narratives of her present-day experiences are flashback discussions of her life from before and during the beginning of the revolution. One day, Offred learns from her shopping partner, a woman called Ofglen, of the Mayday resistance, an underground network working to overthrow the Republic of Gilead.

*The Circle* by Dave Eggers (2013)

[Mae Holland](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-circle/study-guide/character-list#mae-holland)has landed a job at the Circle, “the most influential company in the world”. It combines all of one's online interactions into a single online identity called a TruYou, and has been growing to contain virtually all the other information that exists across the world. The company uses technological innovation to create what it claims is a more efficient and accountable society, especially by increasing transparency in government, business, and even personal lives. Mae begins work in Customer Experience and initially is concerned about her privacy, but she quickly rises in the ranks, gaining access to more screens of information and is sucked into the arguments for full transparency.

***Step 2 Write a compare and contrast essay***

Read both books and answer the following questions. Compose a thorough answer to the questions below. If a question seems appropriate for your combination of books, elaborate. If a question seems less appropriate, or you have few insights on the matter, do not go into detail as much.

* Illustrate your answers with **fragments** from the books.

1. What is the setting of your books?
2. What makes your books good examples of dystopian fiction? (have a look at the typical features)
3. What is/are the main theme(s) of your book?
4. To preserve a totalitarian society, people’s personal lives are invaded in various ways so they don’t rebel against their leaders. How is this true for your books? What methods are used to keep the characters from disobeying their government? (Think of surveillance, restrictions, punishments)
5. What role, if any, does technology play in your books?
6. What role, if any, does religion play in your books?
7. What role, if any, does sexuality play in your books?
8. What are people taught to believe in your books? What is claimed to be good and desirable in those future worlds?
9. What are people taught to despise in your books? What is claimed to be bad?
10. What, according to you, are the writers’ messages? What are we warned against?

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You will then be asked to discuss a number of statements. The best way to prepare for this is to talk about the books a lot **in English**. Example statements are:

* *The Circle* gives us a balanced view on the pros and cons of social media
* Most young people today underestimate the potential dangers of privacy decreasing technologies
* The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* was initially established for positive reasons, to save people from a world of sin and corruption.
* *Brave New World* is not simply a warning about what *could* happen, but also a satire about our society as it exists today.

And, if time allows, you might get some additional questions, such as:

* Did reading these books teach you anything worthwhile?
* Could you relate to the main character? Why (not)?
* Which of the characters in your books did you identify with most?
* Did you like the endings of your books? If you could change one, which would you pick and how would you change it?
* What was the most exciting or interesting fragment in your books?

Or we might ask you to comment on a fragment we’ll show you.

***Assessment***

You will be assessed by your teacher and a colleague. They will focus on fluency, content, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.