The Machine Stops: Unit Overview

ENG4U, Grade 12 English (University), Unit 6. 12 classes of 75 minutes (about two and a half weeks).

The big question

Are the machines we build serving us, or are we serving them?

Students read E. M. Forster's 1909 story “The Machine Stops” in full, in which people live alone in underground rooms, talk through glowing plates and come to worship the Machine that serves them, alongside excerpts from Yevgeny Zamyatin's We (1924), where the Tables of Hours make millions move as one. The unit then turns the questions on today's media: how the attention economy finances free apps, the persuasive design techniques that keep users scrolling (found in a scavenger hunt), how recommendation algorithms narrow a feed (played as a game), and how to check generated media with the SIFT method instead of guessing from style. Students keep a Day Without the Machine diary, create a counter-campaign media text with a written rationale, and pitch it to a panel.

Lessons

#	Lesson	Classes	Question	Expectations	What's inside
1	**Imagine a Small Room**	1	How close did Forster get?	R 1.6, M 1.2, M 4.2	Dystopia conventions; Part I opening; Vashti's room
2	**The Air-Ship**	1	What do we lose second-hand?	R 1.6, M 1.4, M 4.1	The lecture; the Book; touch; “No ideas here”; diary begins
3	**The Mending Apparatus**	1	Who serves whom?	R 1.6, M 1.5, M 4.2	Part II; the sense of space; Kuno's argument; two perspectives
4	**The Machine Stops**	1	What happens when it stops?	R 1.6, M 1.3, M 1.2	Part III; first-hand ideas; worship; silence; prediction scorecard
5	**We: The Straight Line**	1	Freedom or happiness?	R 1.6, M 1.5, M 1.2	Zamyatin's Record One and the Tables of Hours; two dystopias
6	**The Attention Economy**	1	Who pays for free apps?	M 1.6, M 1.1, M 1.5	Glimmer (an invented app); business models; regulation in Canada and Ontario
7	**Design Tricks**	1	Serve or steer?	M 2.2, M 2.1, M 1.1	Persuasive design techniques; mock feed; scavenger hunt
8	**The Algorithm Game**	1	Why do two people see different worlds?	M 1.4, M 1.5, M 1.2	Algorithm loop; the game; filter bubbles

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9	**Spot the AI**	1	Can you tell?	M 1.3, M 1.5, M 4.1	AI samples; style is not proof; SIFT; lateral reading
10	**Counter-Campaign Studio: Plan**	1	Who, why and how?	M 3.1, M 3.2, M 3.3	Topic, purpose, audience, form; model plan; storyboard
11	**Counter-Campaign Studio: Make**	1	Does it work on a real audience?	M 3.4, M 4.1, OC 2.7	Production; peer test; rationale; pitch plan
12	**The Dystopia Pitch Panel**	1	What have we seen?	OC 2.7, OC 1.9, M 4.2	Pitches (summative); final reflection

Assessment

Type	In this unit
Assessment for learning	Vashti's room, no ideas here, Kuno's argument, the collapse, prediction scorecard, two dystopias, follow the money, scavenger hunt, game log, SIFT it, campaign plan
Assessment as learning	Day Without the Machine diary, self-checks, peer test, panel notes, final reflection
Assessment of learning	Counter-campaign media text with written rationale, and the pitch to a panel (Lesson 12), with rubrics in the Summative Tasks file

Texts

Included in the Start Here folder:

- **Machine Reader:** Forster's “The Machine Stops” (1909) complete, and Zamyatin's We, Record One and an excerpt from Record Three (1924 translation by Gregory Zilboorg), all public domain
- **Original media texts:** Glimmer, an invented app with features, a mock feed and settings screen; the Algorithm Game cards; four AI-generated text samples with a teacher key

Students' relationships with phones and social media vary, and for some, online spaces are where they find community. Lessons focus on design and business, never on personal habits; screen-time reflections are private. The Day Without the Machine diary is flexible and offers an alternative for students who cannot disconnect. Facts about Ontario's 2024 classroom cellphone policy and the school boards' lawsuits (allegations not proven in court) were current at the time of writing; check for updates. Support resources (Kids Help Phone; 9-8-8) are included.

What's in each lesson

- Teacher lesson plan with expectations, timed sequence, differentiation, look-fors and answer guides
- Slides with speaker notes
- Student handouts and organizers
- Editable Word and PowerPoint files, plus PDFs

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