

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**

by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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# One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

## Notes on the Author

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was born in 1918 in Kislovodsk, in what was then the USSR. His father died before Alexander was born. The boy was raised by his mother in a small town close to Moscow, where they lived in extreme poverty, at times sharing quarters with farm animals.

Solzhenitsyn was drawn to literature, but in an attempt to procure a position that would offer a stable income, he studied physics and mathematics at Rostov University. He did not completely abandon his literary aspirations, however: while at the university, he took a correspondence course in literature.

While Solzhenitsyn was an officer in the Red Army in the early 1940s, he made certain remarks about Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, whose early indecision in dealing with the invasion of the German Army led to heavy Russian war losses. In that time of suspicion and because of Stalin's own insecurity, Solzhenitsyn's remarks were interpreted negatively by Stalin's secret police, and Solzhenitsyn was put in prison for making them. He was 27 years of age.

Solzhenitsyn was incarcerated for a little more than eight years, the final part of which was spent in Siberia. He began writing for publication, and when *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was finished, he achieved some recognition. Nikita Khrushchev, the new Premier of Russia, anxious to erase the Stalinist terrorism, allowed Solzhenitsyn's works to be published in the Soviet Union.

Following Khrushchev's exit from office, Solzhenitsyn had more troubles with the secret police (which had become the KGB). He smuggled his works out of the country for publication abroad, and he eventually won the Nobel Prize for Literature. After immigrating to the United States, he made his home in Vermont.

When finally allowed to return to his homeland in 1994, Solzhenitsyn found the newly established "democratic society" as distasteful as Stalin's communism and wanted the country to return to a monarchy.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn died of heart failure in 2008.

# One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

## Notes

This novel is set on the freezing steppes of Siberia, shortly after World War II. Russia, under Stalin's rule, is trying to change from an agricultural to a more modern, industrial society. The country needs workers to build its industry, and Article 58 gives the government authorities the power to imprison people in gulags (forced work camps) in order to increase the labor force. The entire novel encompasses only one day, from reveille to the final exhausted sleep, in the life of an ordinary prisoner in one of those camps, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov.

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is brutally frank in its depiction of the horrors of gulag existence, and Solzhenitsyn has included some strong vulgarity. The language and some of the references may be offensive to some students. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is a novel for mature classes.

All references come from the Signet Classic edition of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, copyright 1963.

# One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. recognize the different third person narration and identify when the narrator is
  - third person: Shukhov.
  - third person: omniscient.
2. relate incidents in the narrative that illustrate Shukhov's rules for survival as a prisoner:
  - Prisoners do not lick each other's leftovers.
  - Prisoners do not rely on doctors.
  - Prisoners must maintain their dignity.
  - Prisoners should eat slowly, savoring each mouthful.
  - Prisoners must endure hardships without protest.
  - Work and pride in one's work is necessary.
  - A good squad leader means life.
3. discuss the following: Shukhov, because of his rules to live by, is sometimes described as a "Hemingway code hero," one who believes that while life is absurd and without meaning, man must live with dignity and exhibit grace under pressure.
4. contrast Shukhov's view of religion to Alyosha the Baptist's view.
5. comment on the political atmosphere in Stalinist Russia.
6. discuss the sun as a symbol for freedom.
7. discuss the following use of language:
  - metaphor
  - simile
  - sensory imagery
8. recognize and point out the following literary devices:
  - stereotyping
  - foils
9. discuss the local superstitions found in the story.

# One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

## Questions for Discussion and Essay

1. List some other examples from literature in which the hero endures hardships with dignity because he or she cannot overcome them.
2. Review the use of third-person narrative in this novel. Locate and discuss shifts in narrative perspective.
3. State Shukhov's rules for survival and explain how the most important survival rules relate to the main theme in the story.
4. How do you suppose Shukhov's life compares to the life of ordinary Russian citizens during Stalin's rule? Would Shukhov's rules for survival be necessary for them?
5. Discuss the writer's use of sensory detail to help the reader experience the Siberian cold and the desperate, harsh life of a prisoner.
6. Explain how Alyosha's and Shukhov's views of religion differ; discuss how these two views affect their life in camp and their respective chances for survival.
7. Point out the ways in which life in the camp is a microcosm of Soviet life under Stalin's rule. Consider who the inmates are, where they are from, and the camp rules.
8. Describe the dramatic and symbolic purposes of the sun in this novel.
9. Define and point out examples of metaphors and similes in the novel.
10. By referring to incidents and comments in the text, show that the following are themes in the book:
  - People need hope, even when they have no power to change their situation.
  - To understand another's suffering, it is important to have suffered oneself.
  - It is possible to get a sense of satisfaction from doing quality work, despite bad working conditions.
11. Why do you suppose the author chooses to present just one day in the life of a prisoner, rather than a year or several years in his life?
12. Given that life in the camp represents life for every citizen in Soviet society, what are the faults that the author finds with Communist regimentation?

**Section Two: The Trip to the Work Site, Time Before Work Starts**

Vocabulary

- amalgamated – combined
- brash – bold
- chit – a receipt
- contingency – possibility
- deliberating – pondering, thinking over
- dredge – a tool used for scraping the bottom of a riverbed or similar area
- morose – gloomy
- obliquely – indirectly
- osier – a fine willow branch used for weaving
- pockmarked – scarred in the skin
- prefabs – buildings put together before they are brought to a site
- spittoons – receptacles for discarded cigarettes and tobacco juice
- steppe – flat land

1. What does Shukhov think of Buinovsky?

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2. What is the “morning prayer?”

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3. Explain what is meant when the narrator says that the thoughts of a prisoner are not free.

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4. How many letters is Shukhov allowed each year? Why does he not see the need for more?

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### Section Four: The Noon Break

#### Vocabulary

- bleat** – a goat-like sound
- cadging** – slang word for begging
- grovel** – to beg or plead in lowly manner
- inert** – motionless; inactive
- intelligentsia** – intellectual leaders
- oakum** – fiber or jute woven material used as cheap wall covering
- peremptory** – bossy, having authority
- wangle** – to obtain by trickery

1. How does the cook make his life better at the expense of the zeks? Who else gets extra food?

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2. How is the food distributed to the prisoners?

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3. Support the following statement with a quotation from the text:

The authorities have transformed the prisoners from working men into working animals.

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4. Why does Shukhov have to initiate the theft of the extra bowls? Why does Pavlo need his help?

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## Section Seven: The End of the Day

### Vocabulary

**dismally** – drearily  
**friskers** – people who conduct body searches  
**indelible** – unable to be erased  
**much-touted** – highly publicized  
**pilferers** – thieves  
**sweetmeats** – sweet delicacies, candy or candied fruit

1. What happens to a parcel before it is given to a zek? Why can't a zek protest?

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2. Why are the authorities angered by zeks napping after breakfast?

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3. Describe Shukhov's and the author's opinion of Pyotr Mikhailych and Tzezar as they discuss the paper.

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4. What rule does the commandant make that could rob the zeks of their last bit of freedom? Why does it fail?

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