# REAP WHAT WE SOW









## YOUTH ACTIVISM & CLIMATE LITERACY IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

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# PREFACE
## WHAT IS THIS THING?

This text is designed for educators who are interested in teaching climate literacy, but do not know where to start. There are many exceptional texts out there that discuss ecocriticism and climate literacy, and why they are important in 21st-century society. However, there is a significant lack of accessible resources for busy teachers to apply in their daily practices. It is my goal, then, to produce a practitioner's text that collates loads of useful teaching resources, ready to be implemented in any classroom. While my content area is Adolescent English Language Arts, this text can be used at any grade level and any discipline.

If you wish to use this text but want to read more about climate literacy as a philosophy, I've cited the fantastic resources I consulted when building this text. Again, this text is intended for the educator who is already familiar with ecocriticism and is ready to start working the curriculum. As lifelong learners, we should never stop at one source! Feel free to dig deeper into climate literacy by exploring the works referenced within this text.

# INTRODUCTION

**“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.”**
William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*

## WHY CLIMATE LITERACY?

One of the greatest challenges humanity faces today is the climate crisis. Since the concept entered the main-stream five decades ago, hardly enough has been done to slow or stop the impending environmental Armageddon.

A significant part of the blame for this is due to the lack of comprehensive climate literacy in American education. Even so, the limited rhetoric surrounding climate change is largely pessimistic, which only sows seeds of complacency.

It is true that without significant social changes, the effects of climate entropy will permanently alter life on Earth. However, this is no reason to turn belly-up. **There is a space in the classroom, as in greater society, for empowered young activists who have the potential to elicit change.** This requires an adjustment to the relevant dialogue and an effective curriculum introduced to schools. Those who wield the power for change are not sitting in Congress or a corner office in Silicon Valley, but in the public school system.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY ELA?

The ultimate goal of teaching English is to reflect on human nature as it was and is, to predict how it might become. The humanities cultivate critical thinking skills, teaching students to analyze complex issues from diverse perspectives. These skills are invaluable to interdisciplinary research, which often involves synthesizing information from different areas of study.

**Where science, mathematics, and other "applied" subjects tend to focus on fact-driven data, English focuses on the study of human experiences, values, and social cultures** The issue of climate change should be approached with an interdisciplinary lens, one that values humanistic perspectives as well as scientific ones

Critical pedagogue Jane Lehr states that the "laws" of science should be seen as negotiated rather than objective. This process of meaning-making is an element of praxis learning, where teachers and students are collaborators in the search for truth.

Ecocritical literacy is how students consider and come to understand diverse perspectives on climate change and environmentalism. A full understanding of current issues requires the historical, socioeconomic, political perspectives and beyond—topics that can be explored in the English classroom.

# THE FUTURE IS **YOUTH**

## INSPIRING ADVOCACY

A Native American proverb states that we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, but it is loaned to us from our children. **Thus, it is critical to include our youth in discussions about climate change**. Many young people--needless to say adults, too--fear they cannot create significant change within something so massive as the climate crisis. However, "hope depends on scaling back--on building the kind of societies and economies that can hunker down, concentrate on essentials, and create the type of community...that will allow us to weather trouble on an unprecedented scale."

**In truth, the climate crisis is really a cultural crisis.** The extent of the change we see depends both on the tools we provide our children and the hunger for change that we inspire. Changes in our global society outpace innovations in our schools, and it is our obligation as transformative educators to pave the way for the next generation of lifelong learners and social justice advocates.



**The Climate Change Communication Project Finds:**

**77 % of parents**
support teaching climate literacy.

**57 % of teens**
understand the human causes of climate change.

**27 % of teens**
say they've learned "a lot" about climate change.

**56 % of teens**
are referencing or making posts about the climate crisis online.

**84 % of teens**
**are worried about climate change.**

# **PROBLEMS** AND SOLUTIONS

There are myriad reasons why a comprehensive, interdisciplinary climate curriculum has not been implemented into many schools. For one, the climate crisis has been pushed into the same category as much of our literature-- "a matter of personal moral reckoning rather than an arena of collective action."

Our society has emphasized the individual over the collective, which leads many adhering to their personal ideology in lieu of scientific and social truth. Just as there is a perpetual denial of America's foundation upon systemic racism, there is selective ignorance regarding the climate crisis.

There is no single solution to the climate crisis nor the rhetorical issues surrounding it. However, there are ways in which educators (and society) can reframe our thinking in order to better understand our present context.

THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS REALLY A **CULTURAL CRISIS.**

REJECT ANTRHO-POCENTRISM IN FAVOR OF **ECOCENTRISM**

# PROBLEMS AND **SOLUTIONS**

| | |
|---|---|
| CONFRONT THE **CAUSES AND EFFECTS** OF CLIMATE CHANGE, BOTH **GLOBALLY AND LOCALLY.** | Emphasize solidarity among oppressed and exploited groups to combat injustices comorbid with climate change. |
| PROVIDE A CONTEXT TO THE SCIENCE THAT IS **PERSONALLY AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT** . | Consider data as patterns of issues requiring interdisciplinary solutions |
| PROMOTE A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT **TRANSFORMS HOPELESSNESS INTO ACTION** . | Offer students real experiences that hand them the power to create real change. |

# In the Classroom



## Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based learning promotes students' active engagement in asking questions, investigating topics, and constructing knowledge. Applying critical thinking skills encourages students to evaluate the reliability and relevance of information to draw logical conclusions. Through considering diverse perspectives, students are able to make meaning out of highly nuanced topics in a way that personally resonates with them.

An inquiry approach can be applied liberally in an ELA classroom, as much learning occurs in open discourse of class content and texts. When exploring a text, whether explicitly ecology-oriented or not, an ecocritical lens can be applied by asking the right questions. Here are some prompts to use and expand upon in your own practice:

# Inquiry-Based Learning

## Causes and Accountability

- Who *causes* global warming and who suffers the *effects*? How do intersectional social injustices (racism, classism, sexism, etc.) shape the causes and impacts of climate change?
- The effects of climate change have driven many people groups from their homes. Imagine and discuss the life of a climate change victim or refugee. What is our responsibility to help those victims and refugees? How does our role as American citizens within a global community factor into this?
- What would climate justice look like? What are the most important values/goals to consider when addressing climate change?
- What are the roles of local, national, and world governments in combating the climate crisis? How do political affiliations/beliefs impact the fight against climate change?

## InterdisciplinaryApproaches (ELA + Science)

- Select a species from the endangered, vulnerable, and threatened list.
  - How has climate change affected this species and its greater ecosystem, and what predictions can you make for its future?
  - What kinds of environmental services are people/organizations providing for this species? Are these services helping the species and its environment, and if so, how?
  - Who are the stakeholders in this species' wellbeing? What value do humans gain from preserving endangered, vulnerable, and threatened species?

# Inquiry-Based Learning

## History, Economy, and Social Justice

- How has colonialism (both historical and ongoing) designated "developed" and "undeveloped" areas of the world? Do these areas experience different challenges from climate change?
- How does systemic racism impact our thinking about climate change, its consequences and solutions?
- What are the different cultural ideas about humanity's role in nature and how does that influence perspectives about climate change?
- What can we learn from indigenous cultures about ecocentric living?
- What can we learn from historical and contemporary social movements to promote intersectional justice?
- How might we establish global unity to address climate change? Can we use this as a cause to end competition, domination, inequality, violence, and exploitation?
- How has late—stage, neoliberal capitalism impacted climate change?
- How does extreme economic inequality impact the causes, effects, and solutions of climate change?
- How might we change our thinking about extreme consumption and consumerism to address sustainability and climate change?

# Inquiry-Based Learning

- How do corporations and the wealthy elite admit or deny their responsibility in climate change? How do they influence government policy in their benefit, at the cost of the environment?
- What do corporations do to address climate change? What does greenwashing do to harm the environmental cause?
- What can students do to challenge overconsumption, instant gratification, and social competitiveness?

Certainly this is not the limit or extent of which questions can be asked, these are simply some categorical suggestions that can be adjusted or adapted to whatever circumstances you find yourself in.



# Reading

**"Literature can serve as a witness to social and environmental justice issues"**



Culturally and historically speaking, Reading is tied to participation in civic life and critical literacy supports understandings of power, privilege, and marginalization.

By interacting with characters, conflicts, and settings in a work of fiction, we can further understand and respond to real people, problems, and places.

ELA offers opportunities to discuss ecological relationships with humanity. Literature can aid in drawing these connections.

Many teachers already struggle to fit an immense curriculum into the brief school year. Building a climate curriculum does not require you to scrap your already existing units! There are many ways to use the literature you are likely already teaching to promote climate consciousness.



# Adapting the “Canon” Literature

There are some very cool ways to apply an ecocritical lens throughout traditional units, which ultimately leads to new discoveries in both climate literacy and typical literary studies.

If you are teaching ***The Great Gatsby, The Pearl***, or other units on **20th-century American literature**, you can consider the consumerism and adding:

following:

Have students imagine the carbon footprints of the texts' characters, and compare to today's

figures.

- Pair the focal text with readings about applications, especially ***A Midsummer*** early American environmentalists, ***Night's Dream*** and ***As You Like It.***

like **John Muir, Aldo Leopold, or**

**Maude Murie**. Consider how these historic figures might have interacted

with the book's characters.

When teaching **Charles Dickens,** students **Marlowe, Spenser, Sidney, Milton, Gray** can analyze class differences and **Pope:**

perceptions of the environment. You can pair the texts:

*Life in the* • *Iron Mills* (1861)

*London* • *Labour and the London Poor*

*New York* • *City Sketches*

If teaching Huxley's ***Brave New World*** or Anderson's ***Feed,*** consider discussing

- *So Yesterday*; *Pretties;* or *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld.
- 20-min. video: "The Story of Stuff." how they may

Even **Shakespeare** has eco critical

- Analyze Titania's speech in *MND* act II.1 lines 81-117.
- Read the text *Green Shakespeare* for more.

- All of these poets were influenced by the early Pastoral movement, and tend to depict nature in a magical and appreciative way.
- **Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love"** discusses gender and class roles in the midst of industrialization.

# Adapting the “Canon” Literature

**Romanticism and Transcendentalism: Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Shelley, Thoreau:**

These authors portray the modern world as it breaks sacred bonds with nature.

- **Thoreau's *Walden,* "Walking," "Life Without Principle,"** and **"Civil Disobedience"** all hold implications with climate change and taking a stand against it.
- **Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us"** shows the hope of Romanticism against encroaching industrialism.
- Compare the paintings ***Wanderer Above the Sea*** and ***Houses of Parliament*** for a visual comparison of Romantic vs. Industrial views.

Some more commonly taught short stories and novels that hold up to ecocritical analysis include:

- **"To Build a Fire," "All Summer in a Day," "The Most Dangerous Game," "The Interlopers," "The Open Boat," "Eve's Diary"**
- ***Lord of the Flies, Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, Wuthering Heights,* Tolkien's works, *The Grapes of Wrath, Hatchet, Dune, Frankenstein, The Tempest, Candide,***
- Poems **"Windy Nights" by Stevenson, "Colours" by Rossetti, "The Months of the Year" by Coleridge, "You Are Old, Father William" by Carroll, and "Morning Has Broken" by Farjeon**

Another unique way to utilize the "canon" literature is to **reimagine it** in contemporary contexts. For example,

- ***Of Mice and Men*** - consider how climate change might impact the lives of migrant workers like George and Lenny.
- ***Animal Farm*** - how different class groups are impacted by climate change. Perhaps the pigs are insisting on their privilege at the cost of the environmental conditions for the other animals.
- ***To Kill a Mockingbird*** - Atticus, with the help of Scout and Jem, advocates for legal action to fight climate change

# Young Adult Literature



**Here are some YA books to add to classroom libraries, or even use for lit circles, book clubs, and beyond**

- *The Hunger Games* - Suzanne Collins
- *The Carbon Diaries* - Saci Lloyd
- *The Marrow Thieves* - Cherie Dimaline
- *Exodus* - Julie Beretagna
- *Ship Breaker* - Paolo Bacigalupi
- *Memory of Water* - Emmi Itaranta
- *Water Wars* - Cameron Stracher
- *Birthmarked* - Caragh O'Brien
- *Nature's Confession* - J.L. Morin
- *White Horse Trick* - Kate Thompson
- *Odds Against Tomorrow* - Nathaniel Rich
- *The Rapture* - Lauren Kate
- *Flight Behavior* - Barbara Kingsolver
- *The Water Knife* - Paolo Bacigalupi
- *The Admiral* - James R. Gilbert
- *Arctic Drift* - Clive Cussler
- *Arctic Rising* - Tobias S. Buckell
- *Polar City Red* - Jim Laughter
- *The Sea and the Summer* - George Turner
- *Ultimatum* - Matthew Glass
- *Not a Drop to Drink* - Mindy McGinnis
- *Dry* - Neil & Jarrod Shustermann

# WRITING

**There are so many writing prompts that align with ecocriticism. Whether persuasive essays, narrative fiction and nonfiction, informative writing, or social critique, there are vast possibilities. Here are simply a few to get started from:**

- Use "culture jamming" or "subverting" to challenge corporate greenwashing campaigns through parody.
- Write a series of diary entries from someone living in the year 2050, describing potential outcomes from the climate crisis (can be positive or negative). Refer to real current events.
- Debate whether is is more effective to change personal behaviors or federal legislations to combat climate change.
- Use mentor texts to model student imitations. Write a work of climate fiction in the style of a focal author.



# Film




**"Reading" film as you would a text is a great way to incorporate multimodal literacy. There are multitudes of climate-oriented documentaries that students can explore as a class, in small groups, or solo. Here are a few:**

- ***Waste Land*** **(Muniz 2010)** - About the world's largest landfill in Brazil, where folks sift through the garbage for a living.
- ***The Cove*** **(Psihoyos 2009)** - Documents dolphin hunting in Japan.
- ***Food, Inc.*** **(Kenner 2008)**- Examines the US food industry, including industrial agriculture and livestock farming.
- ***The Garden*** **(Kennedy 2008)**- Tells the story of the South Central Farmers and their fight to keep their communal garden in Los Angeles.
- ***Gasland*** **(Fox 2010)** - Investigates gas drilling in the US, especially fracking and the negative impacts.
- ***Honeyland*** **(Kotevska & Stefanov 2019)**- Macedonian film exploring the decline in wild beekeeping, the tensions between nature and humanity–sustainability vs exploitation.
- ***An Inconvenient Truth*** **(Guggenheim 2006)**- Feature's Al Gore's work to raise climate awareness.
- ***My Octopus Teacher*** **(Ehrlick & Reed 2020)**- South African film about an octopus' habitat in a kelp forest.
- ***2040*** **(Gameau 2019)** - Australian film illustrates an optimistic view of what a biocentric year 2040 could look like.

# Film

- ***Virunga* (von Einsiedel 2014)**- British film ab out the endangered mountain gorillas in Congo's Virunga National Park.
- ***Six Degrees Could Change the World* (Bowman 2008)**- Explores the major effects of even small global temperature increases.
- ***Drop in the Ocean? Ireland and Climate Change*(Whelan & Rice 2015)**- Discusses class disparities in Ireland and globally, and how different classes are affected by climate change.
- ***This Changes Everything* (Lewis 2015)** - Looks at how global Indigenous peoples are processing the climate crisis.
- ***Do the Math* (Nyks & Scott 2013)** - Critiques the American obsession with fossil fuels and the contributions to the climate crisis.
- ***Chasing Ice* (Orlowski 2012)** - Confronts the dangers of our melting polar ice caps.
- ***Before the Flood* (DiCaprio 2016)** - Meets global environmental activists and celebrities invested in combating the climate crisis.

TED Talks are also excellent and *compact* for easy integration in a busy curriculum. Here are a couple worth exploring:

- **"Ecocide: the 5th Crime Against Peace" (2012)**
  - Potential writing prompt: Respond to the speaker's proposal. What would be accomplished if this proposal became law and what else would need to be done? Quote two of the speaker's statements that you find most insightful, challenging, or problematic.
- **"Cars Almost Killed Our Cities, But Here's How We Can Bring Them Back"**
  - Pair this video with the photography *Happy City* by Charles Montgomery and photos from the 1937 World's Fair "Futurama" exhibit.. Compare.



# Media Production

Consuming **multimodal texts** are exponentially more effective when students can model them in their own work. Try assigning projects that have students working with **audio and visual media alongside their writing,** using poetic directing and persuasive framing.

As evident in the statistics found in the introduction, K-12 youth are creating media at a rate that **significantly impacts pop culture trends.** Since they are already participating in this, we ought to teach them how to **apply their skills for change.**

Critical media literacy is foundational to climate literacy and ecocriticism. **To be critical media consumers is to become literacy creators** contributing to the creative conversation around social issues and writing a new dialog.

Here are some resources to help design multimedia learning activities.

# Media Production



### Youth Activism

- Action for Climate Emergency
- Young People's Trust
- Climate Change Education
- Youth4Climate
- Young Voices for the Planet
- Our Climate, Our Future
- Writing Our Future
- YR Media
- National Writing Project
- Global Action Project

You can also explore social media and public relations statements from celebrities and corporations.

Here are some notable **Tweets**.
Visit company websites like **Nike** and **Starbucks** to read their sustainability agreements.

### Art, Music, & Storytelling

- "Polar Army"
- Art for Adaptation
- Climate Stories Project
- Slam poetry by Solli Raphael and Greenpeace

### Video

- Education Video Center
- Shame on You! That Can Be Reused!
- Your Voice
- Lens on Climate Change (LOCC) Project

# Beyond the Classroom




## Experiential Learning

"Walking, we ask questions," says pedagogue Christina Gerhardt, alluding to the importance of active learning. Students should be *physically* applying their learned skills as well as cognitively and socially. "Beyond the classroom" does not suggest that students are restricted within their traditional setting, but that we as educators must allow the classroom to exist as a part of greater society, not separate from it.

For students to engage with the place, space, and people associated with class content is to build meaningful connections that will last. The most successful classrooms are the ones in which students gain personally relevant connections to the world around them, and realize their position as stakeholders in the global community. Global change starts in the community. Students can actually change the world, starting in their hometowns with the transferable skills gained through meaningful schooling.

# GAMES

Role playing and gaming allows students to formulate, craft, and reflect on their actions toward a particular challenge, in this case, climate change. This is a type of inquiry-based learning in which the students follow a trail of "what if's" to better understand a circumstance.

Here are some gaming resources to explore:

- **Negotiating Policy**
  - Keep Cool
  - Cool It!
  - World Climate
  - BBC Climate Challenge
  - Fate of the World
  - Eco
  - ecoKoin
- **Green Urban Development**
  - EnerCities
  - Energy City
  - Future Delta 2.0
  - Plan it Green
  - Power Up!
  - Mysusthouse
- **Role Play**
  - Reus www.reus.com
- **Strategies for Coping/Adapting**
  - Games for Change
  - PoLAR Climate Change Education Partnership
  - The Incredible Carbon Journey
  - Climate Quest
  - Imagine Earth
  - Future Coast
  - The Adventures of Carbon
  - Climate Health Impact
  - Precipice

# Service



Here are some resources to get students involved in their local and global communities *making actual change* through service projects and learning activities. These activities prove to students that they are real stakeholders and changemakers in the midst of the climate crisis.

**Get Involved!**

- 350.org Go Local
- Alliance for Climate Education
- Citizens Climate Lobby
- Climate Action Network
- Environmental Defense Fund
- Friends of the Earth
- Action Greenpeace
- iMatterYouth
- Our Children's Trust
- Sierra Student Coalition
- The Climate Reality Project
- Union of Concerned Scientists
- Youth Climate Action Now
- Dream in Green
- Kids Versus Global Warming
- Team Marine
- Green Ambassadors
- Fridays for Future

# Reading List

**Hopefully the collection of resources above is useful as you get started on your climate literacy journey. Please go ahead and explore the texts below to learn more about ecocriticism and climate**

**literacy education.**


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International Commission on the Futures of Education. The. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education.* UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722

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# Reading List


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Slinger-Friedman, Vanessa. (2018). "Using active and applied pedagogies to develop sustainably minded citizens in geography." In Viakinnou-Brinson, L. (Ed.), *Environment and pedagogy in higher education* (pp. 115-133). Lexington Books.

Young, Rebecca L. (2018). *Confronting climate crises through education: Reading our way forward.* Lexington Books.

Young, Rebecca L. (2022). *Literature as a lens for change: Using narratives to prepare the next generation.* Lexington Books.

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