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Writing about climate change

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Writing about climate change – Green Shoots

Uam Cleary



Zunehmend spiegelt sich die dramatische Dringlichkeit der Klimakrise in der Literatur und Medienberichterstattung wider. Diese Unterrichtseinheit behandelt die Bedeutung des Klimawandels, der globalen Erwärmung und des nachhaltigen Lebens als ein zentrales gesellschaftliches Thema im 21. Jahrhundert. Einflussreiche Autoren und Autorinnen wie Rachel Carson, Eric Roeser, David Attenborough und Gillian Clarke haben in ihren Texten Bedrohungen zum Thema Klimawandel begleitet. Climate change ist ein relevantes und höchst motivierendes Thema für Schülerinnen und Schüler, die sich um das Wohl des Planeten und ihre Zukunft sorgen.

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Writing about climate change – Green Shoots

Liam Cleary



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Competences and skills:

This unit on climate change is designed to assist senior students develop skills in fields such as **listening and reading comprehension**, **analysis of texts** as well as **video analysis**. Newspaper articles, poems, prose extracts, a speech, podcasts and videos have been carefully selected for these purposes. **Research** and **discussion** tasks also form part of the worksheets so as to give students the opportunity to go beyond the class work after lessons have been done.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Analysis	C Comment
D Discussion/debate	G Group work
L Language and style	LC Listening comprehension
P Working with photos	PR Presentation
R Research	RC Reading comprehension
T Working with a text	V Working with a video
W Writing	

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: Environmental issues	M1	A, D, G, P, PR, R
2: Pesticides and the natural world	M2–M3	A, D, L, PR, R
3: Strip mining in Appalachia	M4–M5	A, L, R, T, V, W
4: Climate change – David Attenborough at COP26	M6–M7	A, D, G, L, LC, PR, R, V
5: Global warming	M8–M9	A, D, L, PR, RC, T
6: Consequences of climate change	M10–M11	A, P, R, T, W
Exam: Listening comprehension and text analysis	M12–M13	A, C, L, LC, RC, T, W

Writing about climate change – Green Shoots

Facts

Writing about the climate and the threat which man himself poses to our world has become a major societal theme since the turn of this century. Writers such as Bill Gates, Greta Thunberg, Al Gore, Barack Obama, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben and Eric Reece have all produced important essays or accounts on this theme. In doing so, they all follow example set by one of America's greatest nature writers, the naturalist, essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau. In 1854, he produced his influential work *Walden* which became a bible for generations of people interested in living a simple life at one with nature and having a positive and caring relationship with the world around them. In his book, Henry Thoreau set out a simple philosophy which has become increasingly important for all those drawn towards nature: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."¹

The book, which was written after he built a hut in which he lived alone for two years, related his central belief that people were crushed by work and lived lives of, as he put it, quiet desperation. *Walden* was a book ahead of its time. It is also a good example of how a writer can influence generations of activists, writers, politicians and young people long afterwards. The famous writer John Updike has said of the book that "A century and a half after its initial publication, *Walden* has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mind-set, and Thoreau so vivid a protester, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book itself risks being as revered and unread as the Bible."²

However, Thoreau is also important for his essay *Civil Disobedience*, which he wrote after a tax dispute, and which begins with the statement, "I heartily accept the motto that government is best which governs least; and I should like to see it acted up to

¹ Thoreau, Henry David: *Walden*. 1854. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm> [last access: 29/07/2023]

² Thoreau, Henry David: The introduction to *Walden*. 150th Anniversary edition. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004.

more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe – that government is best which governs not at all”³. In the essay, he argues that individuals should not allow governments to overrule their conscience, a theory which climate activists often follow at great risk to themselves in modern campaigns.

In the years since Thoreau published his writings, many have followed in his footsteps. It is interesting to note that the number of books now being published on the issues of global warming, climate change, sustainability and new forms of energy has mushroomed as the climate crisis has grown more urgent. Likewise, the theme of climate change has forced its way into adult and teenage fiction and many novels and short stories read in class have climate change as a central or secondary theme. In fact, writers from Jules Verne to Margaret Atwood have incorporated climate themes into their novels. In this context, it is perhaps worth mentioning the excellent novels of Marcus Sedgewick (e.g., *Floodland*) as being very suitable for use in class. This continuing growth in climate-related literature, and the proliferation of climate articles in newspapers and online means that the theme is a very likely one for examination papers. The material in this unit has therefore been carefully chosen with classroom and examination purposes in mind. This theme is one that appeals to young students, many of whom are politically active themselves or are concerned about what their future world will look like when they are working and raising families. A final positive factor that accompanies a unit on climate change is the wide availability of audio/podcast and video material which allows teachers and students access to direct examples of the threat the world currently faces but also the beauty of nature and the animal kingdom itself. The work of the BBC has been outstanding in this area and it is to be recommended that the teacher turns to the vast amount of material on YouTube to get students interested in this. Likewise, the Economist magazine videos on YouTube are a further worthwhile resource.

Notes on the material

As the title of this unit suggests, the focus is on writings and articles which people concerned with the state of our planet have published. The writings cover the period from

³ Thoreau, Henry David: Resistance to Civil Government. In: Peabody, Elizabeth: *Æsthetic Papers*. The Editor and G. P. Putnam, Boston and New York 1849, p. 189.

1962 onwards, but it is important to mention that the teacher may also like to choose an extract from Thoreau's *Walden* with which to introduce the philosophy of living alone with a healthy natural environment or from his essay *Civil Disobedience* when discussing how to cope with governments who work too closely with corporations. Both of these works are freely available online and links are provided in this introduction. You can find a timeline of important books by conservationists and climate activists (ZM 1) as well as a list of relevant quotes in the **additional material in the online-archive or in the zip folder**. In **topic 1**, a photo collage is provided to introduce the class to some of the issues covered in this unit and the worksheet of questions and suggestions provides the teacher with the opportunity of exploring climate change, its consequences for nature and, finally, the activism currently being undertaken to combat climate change with students. Above all, it stresses the need for the teacher to start such a unit by getting students to work in groups and to consider the environmental issues we face in daily life and how best to combat them. Two final tasks are provided which might be given as homework and incorporate interdisciplinary tasks which take in the subjects of science, history and music. **Topic 2** centres on an extract from the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, which was published in 1962, shortly before her death and at the height of the Cold War. Carson, who appeared before congressional committees, was instrumental in bringing about a change of attitude in America concerning the use of pesticides and chemicals. The worksheet includes pre-reading tasks on Carson as well as reading comprehension, language and discussion tasks. **Topic 3** combines a written piece by Eric Reece from his book *Lost Mountain* with a video link to the lengthy film of the same name which is available on YouTube. Both of these materials provide students with an example of the horrible consequences of strip mining on nature. As we all know, the effect of fossil fuels goes to the heart of carbon emissions and global warming. Both the written extract and the video reveal how the area of Appalachia has suffered in recent years and how entire mountains have been removed during the pursuit of coal. **Topic 4:** David Attenborough is one of the media's most prominent biologists and nature commentators. His work for the BBC over the last 60 years has drawn people to nature and given them a love of the natural world. The speech provided here was given at COP26 and is accompanied by a worksheet



containing video analysis, discussion and language tasks. **Topics 5 and 6** are two poems by Gillian Clarke and Simon Armitage. The first deals with a breakaway moving glacier, the second with the last snowman on earth. Both address a bleak future; both do so cleverly and eloquently and in a manner students should find interesting and sadly amusing. Questions supplied include true and false, language analysis, discussion and further activity tasks, one of which allows students to compare and contrast both poems. The **exam** contains a listening comprehension test on the topic of the damage being done to the languages of the world by climate change as well as a text by Caroline Lucas, Green MP for Brighton and campaigner for green policies. This document shows a further side effect of pollution as it deals with the death of a young girl in London who was exposed to high levels of air pollution and became the first person in the UK to have that given as the cause of death on her death certificate. The worksheet allows students to write about the role of activists and political leaders by supplying an extra visual task. This provides the possibility of discussing activism and political leadership as a means towards combatting climate change.

Further sources of material for the topics in this unit

- <https://raabe.click/InfoThoreau> [last access: 29/08/2023]
Additional reading: Info on nature writer, essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau
- <https://raabe.click/TheLivingPlanet> [last access: 29/08/2023]
Information on the BBC nature documentary by David Attenborough about the way living organisms adapt to their surroundings.
- <https://raabe.click/Attenborough> [last access: 29/08/2023]
David Attenborough recounts his work for BBC Natural History Unit
- <https://raabe.click/NasaClimate> [last access: 29/08/2023]
Compilation of teaching materials on the topic of climate change
- <https://raabe.click/Podcasts> [last access: 29/08/2023]
Podcasts on the topic for use in the classroom
- <https://raabe.click/HistoryClimate> [last access: 29/08/2023]
Additional reading: A brief history of climate change discoveries

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