

Model Timed Essay:

a 2.5-hour final exam responding to a prompt comparing non-fiction texts

This is an open-book essay exam. Compose an essay with separated paragraphs: an introduction that contains a thesis (your answer with your opinion to the prompt), body paragraphs with evidence from the text and your own analysis, and a sense of closure at the end. Be sure to answer all parts of the prompt in your response. You will have 2.5 hours:

This semester we have read texts centered on the theme “Environment and Sustainability.” Choose 3 of the texts, and describe what you feel is the single most concerning problem (be specific) that each author discussed in his/her book or article and analyze the solution s/he proposed to this problem (direct or implied)--is it do-able? Effective? Practical? Finally, in examining these problems and proposed solutions, tell how you personally have been affected by what you have studied this semester. Have your attitudes or behaviors in regards to sustainability been changed?

This part was not given on the exam—this is helpful advice on breaking down prompts:

TO BEGIN: Before writing the essay, quickly break down the prompt so you stay focused and you can generate a quick outline using the prompt that ensures you will directly respond to what was asked. The rhetoric gives simple steps to do this quickly:

(1) **Read the prompt carefully and several times:** do not “rush in” and start writing as this puts you in danger of writing off topic or missing important parts of the prompt. Take a moment and read the prompt through several times.

(2) **Sum up the topic in a few words:** What is the focus of the prompt? Narrow down the focus of the prompt in a word or two to help you mentally focus as well.

Most concerning environmental problems and potential solutions

(3) **Circle and/or underline the key words:** Circle or underline the command verbs or question words that are telling you do something or asking you about something.

(4) **Identify and count the required steps in the writing task:** this is a crucial step in timed writing. You don't want to overlook any parts of the question and get little to no credit for your work as a result. Number the parts of the prompt you need to address in your essay and oftentimes you can even use this as an informal outline for the essay.

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Environmental Solutions that Sounds Nice, but Would Backfire

In each of the books we read this semester, each author presents dire information when it comes to our environment. In the books *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* by Elizabeth Kolbert, *Green is the New Red* by Will Potter, and *The Sustainability Generation* by Mark Coleman, each addresses very concerning problems which respectively are too much reliance on conventional energy, the mistreatment of environmental activists, and the phenomenon of erroneous consumption. With these problems each author presents a unique and interesting solution intended to make these problems a thing of the past, but only some are do-able, effective, and practical.

In Elizabeth Kolbert's book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* the most concerning issue she examines is how our planet is warming rapidly according to her sources and a lot of that is due to our reliance on conventional sources of fuel and energy that emit more CO₂ into the atmosphere in turn creating climate change. The increased CO₂ is causing extreme and destructive weather and temperatures and a poisoning of the ocean to name only a few of the disastrous consequences she describes. She seeks to provide remedies to this problem by introducing an alternative which would be alternative sources of energy such as solar power, wind power, and biofuels to replace what is currently our main sources of power such as oil, natural gas, and nuclear energy. The utopian model using these kinds of alternative energy approaches is a small Danish island named Samsø. Kolbert saw that when she visited, "Several wind turbines... were whooshing nearby... Off in the distance, the silent fields gave away to the Kattegat, where another group of turbines could be seen,

arranged in a soldierly line in the water." (Kolbert 260). This sounds like a serene and idyllic solution but there are many hidden complications to wind power as well as solar and biofuels.

In reality switching to these alternatives would leave us in a much worse off state than when we started. Those incredibly costly wind turbines only in work Samsø so well because there is open space to place them, and the population it is serving is small enough for wind power to make an impact, but even wind power does not meet all of this small island's energy needs. Also, most wind turbines cannot be used a lot of the time when winds are too fast or too slow. In larger urban areas the prohibitions of cost, space, and output make this not a viable solution. Not only does wind power as a solution have its flaws, so does solar power which produces tons of solar waste annually. After a solar panel's lifetime is over, they must be disposed of and these panels are packed full of heavy metals and most of the world does not have methods to dispose of solar waste products properly. On Samsø, they also successfully use biofuels and Kolbert feels this demonstrates a viable solution that can be used on a larger scale; however, producing biofuel is much costlier to the environment than is commonly realized. To make biofuels you need crops and for crops you need farms. Farms currently focus mainly on making food crops for human and animal consumption, but the demand for biofuels would cause farmers to have to ration their crops which limits availability while drastically raising prices. An alternative would be to create more farmland but this would mean land clearance and the destruction of forests that would result in a whole lot more CO₂ to be emitted into the atmosphere.

Kolbert's solutions to the energy problem is do-able, new, and popular though at the moment, they aren't effective or practical with the current methods that we have to implement them.

The most concerning issue that Will Potter raises in his book *Green is the New Red* is how the activists who are trying to protect our environment as well as the treatment of animals are facing unjust treatment at the hands of the law. Potter argues that law enforcement treats the non-violent members of the activist movement similarly to their violent counterparts who commit arson and destroy of property. Potter proposes that organizations like the FBI who spend so much of their limited time siding with the corporations and hunting down environmental and animal rights activists, some of whom who have been purposefully mislabeled eco-terrorists, should instead focus on real terrorists who threaten the entire country. In his closing statement, Potter writes, "Ultimately, our response must be about the limits of government's political tailoring. It is about reaching a point at which we have outgrown the rhetoric, and we decide to stop wearing the past" (Potter 250). Potter's argument would be reasonable if all the activists in his movement were as calm and docile as the beagles they removed from one of the corporate labs they break into. That is not the case however. Many of the activists use violent methods of bombing, burning, and vandalism. The FBI and other law enforcement agencies treat activists the way they do because many non-violent and violent groups blend in with each other and support one another making it nearly impossible to distinguish who is who. These groups operate so that a violent activist can burn down a

building one night and then join a group of non-violent activists passing out leaflets the very next morning. This melding of two groups makes the jobs of law enforcement that much harder as the activists no matter their status as violent or non-violent do not comply with law enforcement. Potter would like law enforcement to leave all of these activists alone but his proposed solution is not do-able unless this ambiguity between activists changes. If the non-violent activists firmly distance themselves from their rowdy compatriots, then law enforcement may be able to ease off and focus on other matters, but this would not be effective or practical unless the activists take the first steps.

In Mark Coleman's book *The Sustainability Generation* the most concerning issue he addresses is that of erroneous consumption, and Coleman offers a solution that is quite viable and that each of us can participate in. Coleman focuses on how each of us can easily make changes to our own perceptions and habits to enormous benefit to our environment. First, Coleman asks his readers to consider their own part in what he calls erroneous consumption: "I'm defining erroneous consumption here as a 'mindless, heartless, and unconscious desire to accumulate stuff to fulfill one's perceived notion of wealth and class, worth and identity" (Coleman 29). This concept is very prevalent in today's society and has been on the rise since the increased prosperity after World War II. Coleman's solution asks for us to not only to examine and limit our own habits of consumption but to also hold companies, some of the most conspicuous consumers of resources, more accountable. This is a very do-able solution as we can already see it happening with plenty of companies from around the world which we can use as models. These trail-blazing companies, and

Coleman cites many examples in his book, prove the benefits of using less to get more. We need to and more importantly can make change our attitudes when it comes to profit as need to think about it more in terms of benefits to the earth than our wallets or stock prices. Coleman's solutions are also effective and practical because becoming more sustainable actually does, in the long-term, end up saving companies and consumers money.

I personally have had my attitudes towards these subjects changed a lot, though it doesn't seem to be in the direction many of these books have hoped for. I am now more pro-nuclear than I ever have been and am against the mass implementation of solar power as well as wind power and biofuels after looking deeper into what they actually do and their many downsides. I also get a very strange feeling now every time I fill up my car and see there is a percentage of ethanol or any other biofuel in it. Now I wonder where the crops were grown to produce the biofuel, and how much more my food and gas costs because of it. I have also become more sympathetic to law enforcement after reading about what they have to deal with regarding the darker sides of activism. However, with Coleman, I feel I was convinced by his intended argument that we as individuals can and should start rethinking and making changes to our own attitudes and habits and that this can make a substantial impact in the environmental movement. Coleman states: "There is something special that happens when people feel empowered. People communicate, collaborate, take responsible action, become more creative and innovative and adapt to change. Amazing results can be achieved when people feel empowered" (89). Much of what we read this semester about

reaching points of no return, widespread pollution, ever-rising CO2 levels, and corrupt and seemingly unstoppable corporations putting profit before all of our health and welfare was disheartening and made me feel like there wasn't much I could do about any of it. However, I appreciated that Coleman provided a more positive and inviting approach which I think will be needed if we are going to take on these issues and find actual solutions that will work.