

Sample Essay Response Assignment: Will Global Warming Become a Tragedy of the Commons?

Background

It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing.

These are the final words of Elizabeth Kolbert's book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*. While Kolbert has been praised for her accurate descriptions of science, many readers have complained that the book fails to tell us what, if anything, can be done to prevent "catastrophes" from happening in the near or distant future. Others have pointed out that this conclusion goes well beyond science: while the scientific consensus may be that global warming is real and is caused by human behavior, science can not tell us how we are going to respond to the challenge.

This assignment gives you the chance to reflect on the difficult question of what will happen. You are not expected to come up with a solution to the problem.¹ Instead, your paper should consider some of the solutions others have proposed and discuss what makes these solutions difficult to implement. In class, we have talked about some of the ways we are attempting to solve the problem, including regulations on carbon emissions; solar, wind, and nuclear power; biodiesel; and carbon sequestration.

What to do:

Your essay should answer the question posed by the title of the assignment: Will global warming become a tragedy of the commons? Specifically, can we do something to prevent global warming and are we likely to be able to accomplish this? Or is it now inevitable? In your 5-8 page essay, use the metaphor from Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" and any of the articles we have discussed in class to explain why you are optimistic or pessimistic about this situation.

How to do it:

Think of your audience as being made up of people who are aware of the issue but probably not as well informed about it as you are.

Introduction:

You will probably want to begin your paper by briefly explaining what global warming is² (perhaps using *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* as your primary source); you might also want to introduce the central metaphor in Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" to explain the problem we face.

¹ If you think you can solve the problem, remember to send it to Virgin Air CEO Richard Branson, who is offering 25 million dollars for the best proposed solution. Good luck!

² Note: For the sake of this essay I do want you to stick with the scientific consensus on global warming - that is, that global warming is real and is caused by human behavior. The point of the essay is to explore how we might respond to that challenge. If you believe that the whole thing is unreal, that it is flawed science or a conspiracy, that's fine - but play along for the sake of this essay.

Your thesis statement should indicate your own position on this issue by answering any one (but not all!) of the following questions:

- Is it likely that any of the different solutions we have looked at—or some combination of them—will help us to reduce fossil fuel use enough to avoid making the problem worse?
- Can we solve this problem through voluntary behavior (either by corporations or by individuals) or do we have to have strong regulations imposed by the government?
- Is it possible for the whole world to cooperate on something this complex?

The body of your essay should support your thesis by looking at some of the different options we have discussed. For example, if your thesis is pessimistic (that is, you don't believe we have much of a chance of solving this problem), you will want to explain why several of the proposed solutions won't work. You might have sections of the essay on solar, wind, and nuclear power (explaining briefly what each is and what problems we have with it), then carbon sequestration or any of the other possible solutions.

Throughout these sections, you might consider counterarguments: if you are a pessimist, what do the optimists say and why do you disagree with them?

In the conclusion you should briefly sum up your key points: remind readers of why you are optimistic or pessimistic.

This is a challenging assignment. We will work together in class, but you should definitely plan to spend time getting help if necessary.

Requirements

- 5-8 pages
- A correctly formatted MLA Works Cited page (refer to your handbook and follow instructions carefully!) Feel free to use Noodle Bib to format this page.
- Sentences should be fluent with no grammatical errors
- Paragraphs should be focused and should support the thesis

Again, don't hesitate to see me or others for help.

