



COMMON READING DISCUSSION GUIDE

Mixed-Book Discussion

Class of 2024

1. All four of our common readings were published roughly within the last ten years: *The Long Thaw* in 2009, *Merchants of Doubt* in 2010, *Flight Behavior* in 2012, and *Taming the Sun* in 2018. Collectively, how well do these books speak to the moment that we find ourselves in now? Is talking about climate change in 2020 fundamentally different from talking about climate change in 2009, 2010, 2012, or even 2018? If not, why not? If so, how would you characterize the difference?
2. The four common readings represent a wide array of disciplines, drawing on knowledge in areas as diverse as physics, literature, economics, history, engineering, and political science (to name just a few). Take a few moments to introduce your book to the group. Who is the author, and what areas of expertise do they represent? Who is the audience for the book, and how do you know? In a single sentence, how would you describe the book's primary claim or argument about climate change?
3. Scientific evidence shows that the current rate of climate change threatens potentially devastating global consequences for future generations. Yet all four books also suggest that these outcomes are not set in stone: a range of futures is possible, depending on how we act now to combat climate change. Why do you think it so hard for so many people to acknowledge that climate change is happening at all? Why do some people who understand the scientific projections resist taking action to slow the course of climate change? What are the major barriers to meaningful action, according to your readings? Would you modify or add to this list of barriers in any way?
4. Each of these books stakes claims about agency and responsibility, suggesting that a variety of individuals and institutions have key roles to play in combating climate change: scientists, think tanks, government agencies, businesses, technology developers, journalists, private citizens, etc. Who holds the power to generate substantive action on this issue, according to each book? Who is making things happen—or preventing them from happening? Who needs to step up and take responsibility, but has not done so? Do all four books give the same account, or are there substantive differences amongst them?
5. Collectively, your readings show scientists acting in a variety of roles: conducting and publishing research, advising business and government leaders, leading technology innovation, teaching undergraduate and graduate students, and more. Archer and Sivaram, both scientists, wrote *The Long Thaw* and *Taming the Sun* to educate the general public; *Merchants of Doubt* and *Flight Behavior*, meanwhile, acknowledge the reluctance of many scientists to address general audiences. What role should scientists, specifically, play in the effort to slow climate change?

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Are scientists meant simply to do science? What responsibility, if any, do scientists have to educate the public about climate change? If not scientists, who should do this educational work?

6. One of the challenges to mobilizing action on climate change is its seeming lack of immediacy: we must take steps now, in order to mitigate the consequences for our descendants hundreds and thousands of years from now. How effectively do each of the four books grapple with this challenge? In your opinion, what strategies are best equipped to generate urgency around climate change now—especially when the impact of our choices today may not be felt in our lifetimes? Appeals to fear? to ethical responsibility? to something else entirely?
7. Each of the four books tackles climate change from a different disciplinary perspective: Archer is a geophysical scientist; Sivaram is a physicist and technology developer; Kingsolver is a novelist; Oreskes and Conway are historians of science. What *unique* contributions can each of these disciplinary perspectives bring to conversations about climate change? Do novelists or historians have particular powers that scientists do not? Do scientists have particular powers that novelists and historians do not? Consider each of the four books, in relation to the others: can you articulate what each book contributes to the story of climate change, that none of the other books provide?
8. In your opinion, what perspectives and voices are *missing* from this collection of four books? Are there audiences whom these four books collectively do not address? If you were to revise the list of readings for next year's freshmen class, what changes would you make? Are there specific authors or books that you would recommend including?
9. How optimistic does this group of authors seem to feel about our collective ability to avoid the worst projected outcomes of climate change? After reading these books, and participating in this discussion, how optimistic do *you* feel about our ability to do so?
10. This conversation is part of your orientation as members of the Harvard Class of 2024, and it takes place as you officially embark together on four years of undergraduate education. In what ways, if any, have these readings and conversations shaped your thinking about your own personal responsibility when it comes to climate change—as individuals, and as a community of students? In your opinion, what role(s) are college students uniquely positioned to play in meeting the challenges of climate change?