Should our use of paper or plastic be regulated by the government?

GETTING ORIENTED

The weekly passage introduces San Francisco’s laws about plastic bags. Here is some information that might be helpful to students less familiar with this issue.

Plastic Bags

Plastic bags are such a small item that people may have trouble understanding how using one bag can be a problem. But Americans throw away 100 billion plastic bags a year. Since plastic bags are made from petroleum, the resources used are the equivalent of using nearly 12 million barrels of oil. When these plastic bags get water logged and sink to the bottom of lakes or oceans, they cover the floor that is the feeding ground of many animals such as shrimp, shellfish, and sponges. To understand how the bags affect living things in the water, imagine that you are eating dinner, and someone throws a big plastic bag over your dinner table. The majority of plastic bags are recyclable if the material is clean, dry, and without black pigment.

Recycling

Recycling turns materials that would otherwise become waste into valuable resources. Collecting used bottles and cans can earn you some money in some states, but doing so is also so important for a healthy environment. Natural resources such as trees, water, and minerals are all preserved when we recycle. Recycling also saves energy, reduces the need for landfills, and keeps streets, parks, and waterways cleaner. Future generations will be better off if we protect the environment now. San Francisco may have been the leader in this kind of program, but many other cities have joined in to support the environmental health of the world.

Biodegradable Products

Biodegradable products are products that are able to decompose back into natural elements. For example, things made from wood and paper are biodegradable. When you use biodegradable products, you are helping to protect the environment for yourselves and for generations to come. Plastic bags are not biodegradable, but they can usually be recycled if you take them to a recycling location.

Green Politics

Many people in the U.S. and other countries are very concerned about the environment. These concerns are major topics for people seeking political office. The effort to protect the environment through stricter laws, oversight, and awareness is called Green Politics. This movement began in the 1970s. Green politicians are very concerned about the use of plastic bags and the fact that they are not recycled on a regular basis.
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## EVIDENCE AND PERSPECTIVES

| General Public | Some may have this view: Some people feel the use of bags should be regulated by the government. Many cities across America help their citizens recycle by providing a variety of bins for different kinds of waste such as plastic, paper, and yard waste. People may feel good about doing their part to help the environment. They may already choose to bring their own reusable bags to stores instead of using plastic. Those who support regulations of bags feel thankful the government has taken the lead on plastic bag legislation. | But others may think: Other people feel that it should be an individual choice. They may feel strongly about not wanting the government to interfere with everyday activities. They believe they should be able to make their own decisions about whether or not to choose reusable bags or embrace a recycling program. They may feel that remembering to bring your own bags is inconvenient. They don’t think landfills are an immediate threat to the world. They also believe that it should be stores’ responsibility to provide bags, not an individual’s responsibility. |
| Store Owners | Some store owners may want bag use to be regulated because it means they don’t have to deal with ordering and stocking so many bags. Store owners can create reusable bags with their own store names and logos and sell them, allowing them to feel like their stores are part of the community. They may think the regulations allow them to be greener without taking blame from customers over any inconvenience. | Many store owners see the regulation of plastic bags as a major inconvenience and believe it should be the individual’s choice. They think stores should be allowed to provide the bags that customers want and that supplying paper bags will cost them a lot more than plastic. People may also be frustrated if the store clerks tell customers they need to bring their own bags or buy them. They may not see plastic bags as a major or immediate problem. |

## Additional Information

- The average person generates 4.5 pounds of trash every day or about 1.5 tons of solid waste per year. Although the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 75% of solid waste is recyclable, only about 30% is recycled.
- The U.S. has over 2,000 landfills that create hazardous air emissions (methane) and eventually leak toxic waste into the ground water.
- Recycling protects and expands manufacturing jobs in the United States.
- Recycling reduces emissions of greenhouse gases that contribute to global climate change.
- Buying recycled products helps make the recycling process a success.
- Americans throw away 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour.
- There are 25 trillion pieces of plastic debris in the ocean. Of that, 269,000 tons float on the surface, while some four billion plastic microfibers per square kilometer litter the deep sea.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [www.epa.gov/osw/conserve/rrr/recycle.htm](http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserve/rrr/recycle.htm)
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ANNOTATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Features of Academic Text: Explicit awareness of organized discourse

“Paper or plastic?” asks a grocery clerk in Des Moines. You no longer hear that question in San Francisco. In 2007, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors banned grocery stores from using plastic bags to bag groceries. Groceries are now put in paper bags or bags that customers bring from home. Since then, numerous other cities around the world have phased out the distribution of plastic bags by banning their use. Some say that the city government has overstepped its bounds. They feel the city took action that it should not have taken.

Supporters say banning plastic bags is a good strategy. They cite research that says plastic bags are bad for the environment. Our country uses 30–100 billion plastic bags per year, and the bags are piling up in landfills. Most plastic is not biodegradable, and plastic bags will stay in the landfills for hundreds of years. Plastic bags also litter the streets. Some drift out to sea and kill turtles and other sea creatures. Plastic bags are made from petroleum, or oil, a costly resource. People who support the ban say that our earth is being polluted and its resources are being wasted. These people argue that we need government intervention to protect the earth and its resources.

Opponents state that city governments have no authority to ban plastic bags. They argue that storeowners are doing their part to help the environment. Some storeowners are phasing in recycling strategies, such as placing recycling bins for the plastic bags in their stores. People against the ban also point out that plastic bags do not pose any immediate danger. They claim that there are no data that prove that paper is better. After all, we chop down trees to make paper bags. In addition, paper bags weigh more than plastic bags, so it costs more to transport them from the factory to the store. They are not as strong as plastic, so we use more of them. Finally, people against the ban argue that private industry pays for the bags, not the taxpayers, so private industry should decide. What is your opinion? Should city governments ban plastic bags or should the grocery stores decide?
GENERATING WORDS

Roots and Prefixes

The root of a word is the base part of the word that helps you figure out what the whole word means. It gives the basic meaning. The meaning of the word can be changed by adding a prefix before the root.

For example, the prefix bio- means that the word is related to life. All of the following words have something to do with life or living things.

Directions: Match the word with its meaning.

- biodegradable
- biohazard
- biotechnology

- material that is dangerous to living things
- using living organisms to make advanced products like pharmaceuticals
- capable of decaying through the actions of living things

Using your knowledge of prefixes and root words, what do you think the following words mean?

Write the definition next to each word.

biodiversity
biosphere
bioweapon

What are some other words that have bio- in them?
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DEVELOPING DISCUSSIONS

**Step One:** Look at the reasons for both sides of the issue. Think about which reasons you believe are strong and which are weak. Color in the meter above each reason. Think about why you chose the strongest and weakest reasons. Be ready to explain to your partner. Think about how you can use the focus words: strategy, research, cite, phase, and data.

**Step Two:** Explain your meter to your partner and have them explain theirs, using the phrases in the box to the right. Why did you choose a strong or weak rating? Ask your partner questions if you need more explanation. Challenge your partner if your ratings are different. As a pair, be prepared to argue that one of the issues has stronger reasons.

**Step Three:** As a pair, explain to another pair of students in the class which side you think has the stronger reasons.

**Words and phrases:**
- The strongest reason for banning plastic bags is _____.
- The strongest reason for not banning plastic bags is _____.
- This is the strongest reason because _____.
- The article provides evidence for this when it says _____.
- This is the weakest reason due to _____.
- That sounds like a good reason, but what is the evidence for _____?
- Is there data to support _____?
- I agree that it’s the strongest. Can you think of any more evidence?
- That’s important, but do you think it outweighs _____.
- I didn’t think of that. Can you say more?
- We decided that _____ has stronger reasons. For example, _____.
- Which side do you think has the best reasons?
- Can you think of any reasons that are not included here?