

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection

Note: This week's AoW is two different articles, both addressing the world's problems.

Bill Gates: The world is better than ever

He wants Americans to know that investing in optimism works.

Source: Doyle McManus/ Los Angeles Times 2/8/14

Bill Gates wants you to feel much better about the future of mankind. Things are looking up, he says, way up.

"By almost any measure, the world is better than it has ever been," Gates wrote in his annual letter chronicling the work of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, through which he plans to give away most of the fortune he made from Microsoft.

"People are living longer, healthier lives. Many nations that were aid recipients are now self-sufficient," he wrote. "By 2035, there will be almost no poor countries left in the world."

By then, he added, the child mortality rate in the world's poorest countries should be as low as the U.S. child mortality was in 1980. And the world's population will soon stop growing too, his wife, Melinda Gates, wrote in the letter. Once parents no longer fear losing children to starvation or disease, she explained, they'll choose to have fewer babies.

Does the Gates' letter do a little bit of overselling in the service of their optimism? Probably.

On health, for example, where Gates has spent billions, he cites a study by Gates-funded scholars suggesting that child mortality in the developing world could fall to the 1980 U.S. rate by 2035 — "with the right investments and changes in policies." But the same study also warns that the goal can't be reached without those investments and policy changes.

On population, Melinda Gates quotes Swedish statistician Hans Rosling, who has ebulliently declared that the number of children alive in the world today "is probably the most there will ever be." Plenty of population experts think that's premature. And, in any case, the Gates Foundation is still working to make contraception more available, including sponsoring a global competition to invent a more user-friendly condom (to borrow terminology from the software industry).

But these are quibbles, because Gates' letter wasn't meant as a sober, scholarly forecast. It was intended to puncture the widespread belief that the world's deepest problems can't be solved. And many development experts agree with Gates that the primary momentum in most of the developing world today is one of progress on poverty and health.

Last year, for example, the United Nations announced that the global rate of extreme poverty, defined as less than \$1.25 per person per day, has been cut in half since 1990, far faster than expected.

"The belief that the world is getting worse, that we can't solve extreme poverty and disease, isn't just mistaken. It is harmful," Gates writes. "It can stall progress. It makes efforts to solve these problems seem pointless."

In particular, Gates is worried that too many people believe that foreign aid is a waste of taxpayers' money. "Aid is a fantastic investment, and we should be doing more," writes the man who made his name as a cutthroat software entrepreneur.

As Gates put it to me in an interview several years ago, "If voters understood it, they'd be for it."

Public opinion polls suggest that he's right about Americans not understanding. Polling has found that most voters think foreign aid accounts for anywhere from 10% to half of the federal budget; the actual figure is about 1%. And yet, many of the same voters say they're willing to support foreign aid, as long as they can be convinced that it's effective.

In Gates' view, there's plenty of evidence that it is. "The increase in farming productivity, like the green revolution, that's aid; billions would have starved without aid," he told the *Washington Post* recently. "Measles deaths are down; that's all aid. Smallpox eradication, that's aid. Capitalism did not eradicate smallpox; it just doesn't know how."

And Gates presents evidence that his efforts too have had results.

Fewer children are dying from preventable diseases, thanks partly to the large-scale vaccination programs Gates has helped build. There's even been progress in the global campaign to eradicate polio, although last year saw new outbreaks of the disease in Syria, Somalia and Kenya.

There are even signs that Gates' message is getting through on Capitol Hill.

Last month, even as it was cutting federal spending for most discretionary programs, Congress actually approved the Obama administration's full request for international health programs — and, after lobbying by Gates, actually increased U.S. funding for polio eradication.

The goal, the Republican-led House Appropriations Committee said, was to "fulfill the nation's moral obligation to those in dire need."

Reducing childhood disease and closing in on the elimination of polio are historic achievements, to be sure. But persuading Congress to increase funding for foreign aid? Now that's a miracle.

The World's Biggest Problems

Source: The Arlington Institute

The World's Biggest Problems portal has a simple, clear mission: educating people all around the world about the biggest problems facing humanity. These problems have two criteria, they must be global in scope, and have the potential to rapidly escalate into severe crises.

- **Economic Collapse** : Fragilities in the current global economy could tip the developed world into conditions not seen since the 1920s.
- **Peak Oil** : Petroleum has powered the modern world for almost 100 years; today, many industry insiders say that we may be reaching a permanent peak in oil production.
- **Global Water Crisis** : Over the last 50 years the human population has nearly tripled, while industrial pollution, unsustainable agriculture, and poor civic planning have decreased the overall water supply.
- **Species Extinction** : Certain species that human beings depend upon for our food supply are going extinct; if their numbers fall too low we may face extinction ourselves.
- **Rapid Climate Change** : While the debate rages on about the causes of climate change, global warming is an empirical fact. The problem is both a curse and blessing, in that people from different cultures will either have to work together or face mutual destruction.

For more details on the world's biggest problems, go to: <http://www.arlingtoninstitute.org/wbp>

Possible Response Questions:

- Do you agree or disagree with Gates? Where? Why? Be specific.
- Reflect on one of the world's biggest problems. How can it be solved?
- Select any passage and respond to it.