

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

5 Things to be Encouraged About in 2014

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1. Energy independence is on the horizon

The United States [exports gasoline](#) by the boatload (literally) to the Middle East and the rest of the world. We now sell more than 3 million barrels a day of that and other refined energy products like diesel and jet fuel to foreigners — a figure that has tripled in recent years. Thanks to higher mileage standards for cars, along with other factors, we simply don't need as much gasoline as we used to. And that's not all: Last year, the U.S. reached a major milestone, [producing more oil here](#) at home than it imported. Credit the rise of "fracking," which has led to an energy bonanza in places like North Dakota (whose unemployment rate of 2.6 percent is the nation's lowest) and Texas. The energy consulting firm PIRA says the United States has now [overtaken](#) Saudi Arabia to become the world's biggest oil producer.

2. We're eating less junk food

Want fries with that? Increasingly, the answer is no. After rising steadily for years, adults are beginning to consume less bad food. Not a huge drop, mind you, but the Centers for Disease Control say adults got 11 percent of their calories from nutritionally poor fast food in 2010 (the last year for which data has been analyzed), down from 13 percent in 2006. Equally encouraging, the CDC adds that childhood obesity rates have now fallen for the first time in 30 years. The CDC says eating more protein and fewer carbs contributed to a 7 percent drop in calories consumed for boys and 4 percent for girls between 1999 and 2010. Given that poor diet and nutrition are major long-term contributors to killers like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, the emerging trend of healthier diets, were it to continue, would almost certainly help contain health-care costs in the years ahead.

3. America is the world's No. 1 place to do business

Americans sure like to whine about how tough it is to operate a business. Funny, then, that a [global survey](#) of executives from 302 companies revealed this fact: for the first time since 2001, the United States [ranks as the most desirable place on the planet in which to invest](#). The worldwide survey, by consulting firm A.T. Kearney, said that China, which had been on top for a dozen years, was knocked off its perch to No. 2, followed by Brazil, Canada, and India.

What makes America No. 1? An educated, high-tech, mobile workforce, more competitive wages (and sharply rising wages in China) the falling cost of energy, political stability, and the rule of law, among other things. It's no secret that foreign companies have been investing here in droves, building auto and energy-related facilities. They've also been scooping up real estate. But it's not just foreigners. An increasing number of U.S. firms, for similar reasons, are beginning to "inshore" jobs back to this country. Follow the money: Capital flowing into this country (\$227 billion in 2011, up 15 percent from 2010) is a huge sign of global confidence in America.

4. Graduation rates are improving

The more you learn, the more you earn. The correlation is clear as a bell: The [national unemployment rate](#) in November for adults with no high school diploma was 10.8 percent. For those with a high school diploma: 7.3 percent. Even better, if you have a bachelor's degree or more, the unemployment rate is 3.4 percent. So it's encouraging to see that in today's high-skill, high-knowledge economy, 78.2 percent of high school students [graduated on time](#) in 2010 — the best rate since 1974. The Department of Education says gains were widespread, with Latinos — the fastest-growing population bloc — showing the strongest increase.

How have we done it? Among the helpful initiatives: Flex schedules and online teaching so students with jobs or babies can earn credits; requiring struggling kids to give up cushy electives for intensive tutoring in reading and math; and sending school officials door to door to encourage truants into returning to class.

There's tons of room for improvement, though. Graduation rates for minority kids still trail white kids by wide margins, with about one third of black students and 29 percent of Latino students dropping out before graduation.

5. Gun violence is down

Tragedies like the Sandy Hook massacre and Washington Navy Yard shootings rightfully get a blizzard of media attention, along with renewed debate on guns and their role in American society. But [overall gun violence in the United States is far lower](#) than it was two decades ago. After peaking in 1993 at seven deaths per 100,000 people, firearm homicides in the United States, fell 49 percent through 2010. The study by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center [also found](#) that firearm-related violence — assaults, robberies, sex crimes — was 75 percent lower in 2011 than in 1993. Even so, Pew finds that "most Americans are unaware that gun crime is lower today than it was two decades ago." It says 56 percent of Americans believe gun crime is higher than 20 years ago, while just 12 percent think it is lower. The data does show, however, that the rate of gun crime has begun to inch up since bottoming out in 2008. The overall drop comes as other studies show gun ownership declining in America with a smaller percentage of households — about 34 percent — owning firearms.

Possible Response Questions:

- Reflect on one (or more) of the five things to be encouraged about listed above.
- Reflect on one school-related issue that you find encouraging for the New Year.
- Explain/reflect on what else you find encouraging for the New Year (inside and/or outside your personal life).