

THE POSTMORTAL

BY DREW MAGARY



FIRST YEAR AND COMMON READING RESOURCE GUIDE

BY CHRIS GILBERT

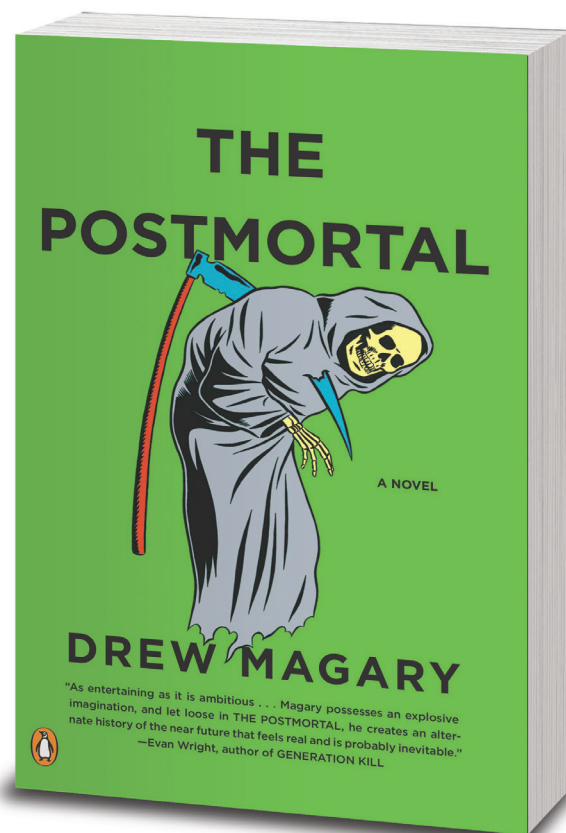


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I. INTRODUCTION

A dystopian work allows the reader to escape the present and simultaneously experience what the present could eventually become. *The Postmortal*, by Drew Magary, depicts a dystopian future inhabited by hordes of human beings who no longer age. While humans have long desired the “Fountain of Youth,” Magary’s novel suggests that a world teeming with the eternally young is likely also one characterized by perpetual strife, overpopulation, and environmental decline. *The Postmortal* is a uniquely relevant work that invites students to consider questions regarding mortality, aging, genetic engineering, assisted suicide, and more. This guide is designed to facilitate such inquiry. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured here, students are encouraged to adopt a critical view of both *The Postmortal* and related, personal experiences and societal issues. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, various classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First Year Experience (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.



II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. If you were offered the cure, would you accept it? Why? Why not?
2. Isaac Asimov once stated, “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.” Given humanity’s propensity for violence and inability to prevent inequality and oppression, would a cure for aging allow human beings to evolve and solve such persistent problems, or would it exacerbate them?
3. How does the unique structure of the narrative, constructed through blog posts, affect the reader’s interpretation of the book? If the story was told in a more traditional fashion, would the reader perceive the narrative differently? Why? Why not?
4. Consider the various relationships that John has with other characters throughout the book. How do these relationships contribute to, or detract from, his growth as a character?
5. “Because they’re all getting divorced. All of them. Every banker and hedge fund guy in this town is looking for a way out right now. And if they aren’t looking for a way out, their wives are” (Magary 35-36). How does this cultural trend influence how John manages his intimate relationships? In reality, given the discovery of a cure for aging, do you think most married people would seek divorce? Why? Why not?
6. “I’m just looking for a gracious exit. A way back to your mom. And here it is. A tumor. A big, fat, lovely tumor. I could kiss the damn thing” (Magary 150). How does John’s father’s attitude about death contrast how others in the book perceive it?
7. “Test results for a ‘home version’ of the cure for aging produced by pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer have been ‘massively successful’...A single-injection version of the vector could be ready for the general public as soon as next year” (Magary 171). Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of such easy access to the cure. Would such a substance need to be tightly regulated, or would regulations undermine corporate profits and restrict something that citizens should be able to conveniently obtain?
8. “No one ever figured out how many people perished or how the fire began. No one cared. That’s how cheap life is now. We get a surplus, and we burn it off” (Magary 195). Locate other examples of devalued life in *The Postmortal*. If the cure for aging were discovered in our world, would most people appreciate life more or less? Defend your answer.



9. “People are endangering the entire planet simply by sitting there and *being*. What I am doing is providing the only jolt of reality left. Everyone thinks that they can’t die now. Well, they can. And they will” (Magary 199). What motivates the different extremist groups mentioned in *The Postmortal*? Are any of their actions justified?
10. If you could ask Drew Magary one question about *The Postmortal*, what would you ask? Why?

- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation (“Right there” questions do not work well for this).
- Have students answer each other’s questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>).*
- For more information, consult this resource: <http://www.readingquest.org/strat/qar.html>

*All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.

III. VARIOUS CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following are short activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

1. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *The Postmortal* through this activity. QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships and works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. The types of questions include:

- **Right there questions:** answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text.
(What does John say his reason is for getting the cure?)
- **Think and search questions:** answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together.
(How does John’s father initially feel about the cure? How does this change throughout the book?)
- **Author and you:** answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence.
(Explain the reasoning of both pro-death and pro-cure factions. Which side do you identify with? Why?)
- **On my own:** answers connect personal experience with themes of the text.
(Do you feel marriage is a realistic and desirable arrangement? Why? Why not?)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other’s questions in writing.
- Have students submit questions on notecards, and randomly select several for formative assessments.

2. Character Blog

To encourage students to think more deeply about the world John Farrell inhabits (and to imitate the style of the book), have them blog from the perspective of a secondary character in *The Postmortal*. To begin, have students select a character. Some possible choices include:

- John’s father
- A doctor administering the cure
- Solara Beck
- A member of the pro-death movement
- A Greenie
- A Church of Man member

Students should write multiple entries from their selected character’s perspective that refer to various events in the book. Have them write in first person, and encourage them to be reflective and creative as they compose. For example, a student writing as Solara Beck could provide an account of her interactions with John Farrell and her resulting feelings about him; a cure protester could explain his or her reasons for resisting and remaining mortal. This activity should inspire students to think critically about the text and compose in a creative fashion. To add more depth to the assignment, have students include images and videos in their character blog entries. Also, students (as characters) could comment on each other’s blog posts to introduce another imaginative layer.

Either of these resources would work for this assignment:

- Google Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com/>
- WordPress: <http://wordpress.com>

Students could of course draft their entries on paper, but one advantage of digital composition is that students write for an authentic, interactive audience, and instructors may find that this provides extended discussion and reflection during the activity.



3. Small Group Constructive Controversy

“Working with a team of fellow geneticists, Otto targeted this gene in hopes of finding a way to color hair through gene therapy. ‘It wasn’t the most noble of genetic experiments,’ he wrote. ‘It was the sort of thing a wealthy university like U. Oregon does from time to time, when it feels like playing around’” (Magary 47).

Is genetic experimentation ever a noble act? Should scientists “play around” with human genes?

Students can answer and argue over questions such as these during the Constructive Controversy activity. This process requires students to research a controversial issue, assume a side (for or against), and argue it. To make things more interesting, though, students will eventually deliver arguments for both sides. Since it is an important issue both in and outside the text, genetic engineering is an ideal topic for this activity. However, if instructors wish for students to focus only on the text, they could argue for/against the cure. Either way, proceed in this fashion:

1. Present the topic and break students into groups of four with each consisting of two pair.
2. Have each pair research both sides of the issue (this could be done during the same class, or students could be given substantial time to research and prepare outside of class).
3. When ready for debate, have students flip a coin to determine which pair delivers the first argument and whether it be in support or against.
4. Time the debate and let the first side present their argument while the opposing pair attempts to refute it.
5. When time expires, allow the other side to present while the opposing pair argues against them.
6. After both pairs have presented their arguments, have them switch their positions and begin the debate anew.

After the activity concludes, the entire class could discuss, or students could expand on their individual beliefs through writing. Also, consider asking students if their original opinions were changed by the activity.

- For more information on Constructive Controversy, consult: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_71.htm

4. Institutional Analysis through Website Creation

Greenies, pro-death insurgents, pro-cure supporters, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Man, etc. There are numerous groups and institutions in *The Postmortal* that view and react to the cure in different ways. In this assignment, student groups will each select a contemporary institution or

organization, theorize what their faction’s stance would be if the cure actually existed in reality, and locate its equivalent institution in the text. Each student group’s analysis will be displayed on a website they create.

To create their website, students could utilize either of these free resources:

- Weebly: <http://www.weebly.com>
- Google Sites: <http://sites.google.com>

1. Break students up into groups of four or five.
2. Have each group select and research one real-world organization likely to have a strong reaction to the cure if it were discovered today. Some possibilities include:
 - World Transhumanist Association: <http://www.transhumanism.org/resources/transhumanism.htm>
 - U.S. Food and Drug Administration: <http://www.fda.gov>
 - National Institute on Aging: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/>
 - Center for Genetics and Society: <http://www.geneticsandsociety.org/index.php>
 - SENS Research Foundation: <http://www.sens.org/>
 - Human Genetics Alert: <http://www.hgalert.org/>
3. On their website, each student group should:
 - Provide thorough summary and analysis of their selected organization’s central principles and probable reaction to the cure (for example, would the FDA attempt to block it outright, or would they legalize and regulate it? Specifically, what sort of regulations would they likely propose?)
 - Locate their institution/group’s equivalent faction (if one exists) in *The Postmortal* and compare/contrast them.
 - Include graphs, images, videos, and direct quotes from the text within their analysis.
 - Include several discussion questions that provoke analysis of both their organization and *The Postmortal*.

Encourage students to be creative and design professional websites consisting of multiple pages. When finished, have each group display their work to the class, and have them close their presentation by sharing their discussion questions and facilitating a conversation.



5. Population Analysis

“From the east, a rolling mass of humanity flushed out from the trees and roads crept along the landscape like raging floodwaters...Thousands upon thousands of people were moving farther inland, compressing the population. Teeming. Swarming” (Magary 356).

“There are 720 million people in this country right now...If we don’t get a firm handle on our population, which is spinning wildly out of control, nature will be more than happy to assume command for us” (Magary 194).

In *The Postmortal*, the reader observes a world characterized by extreme overpopulation; at present, despite a much smaller world population, human beings risk eventually creating the reality depicted in the text. Have students (individually or in small groups) assess the likelihood of such a scenario through the following activity:

1. Students will first need to locate (or make inferences about) several specific countries and population figures mentioned in *The Postmortal*. Have students compare locations, population totals, and dates mentioned in the book to current population projections. To view and interpret these projections, students can utilize these two resources:
 - <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/countryrank/rank.php>
 - <http://esa.un.org/unpd/ppp/>
2. Next, have students consider the following questions:
 - How do the actual (or your estimated) population totals from *The Postmortal* compare to the real population projections you researched?
 - If a cure for aging were actually discovered in our world, to what degree would population projections be affected? Would population figures mirror those in the book?
 - Finally, what real actions should be taken to ensure sustainable population growth? Compare these to methods (end specialization, etc.) mentioned in the novel.

Students should present their answers to the questions above by using graphs, tables, and other visual means. Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/>) would be ideal for this. Allow students to present their conclusions, and use them to inspire class discussion and further analysis of current population and sustainability concerns.

IV. RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper
 - Deliver a classroom presentation
 - Design a lesson plan and teach a class
 - Create a website (<http://www.weebly.com> and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
1. How would a cure for aging affect various contemporary industries? Consider several industries such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, fashion, etc. Perform research and discuss two-three business sectors and their likely reactions to the discovery of an aging cure. Also, consider if, and how, these industries could adapt to maintain relevance in such a world.
 2. In her “Two Minute Talking Point” (<https://vimeo.com/70050551>), Laurie Goering states, “The problem is that as there are more and more of us, we are changing the climate faster and faster. The world’s population has more than doubled in the last 50 years, from just over 3 billion people to just over 7 billion. By 2050, the UN predicts it will hit 9 billion.” While considering current population trends, analyze what sort of environmental consequences could occur in the coming years and propose practical interventions and policies designed to decrease humanity’s ecological footprint. Also, if the discovery of a cure for aging did occur, how would your proposed solutions need to be augmented to effectively control population growth and lessen climate change?
 3. “End specialization is the single most unethical American enterprise since slavery. I am all for population control, but what is unacceptable to me is how this government can endorse subsidized suicide” (Magary 194).
In *The Postmortal*, end specialization serves as a heightened version of assisted suicide, a real source of intense controversy. Research both sides of the debate (pay close attention to ethical and legal implications of assisted suicide), choose one side to support (for/against), and construct an articulate, substantiated, persuasive argument. Be sure to refute the opposing side’s main points as you formulate your argument.
 4. In his piece titled “Do You Want to Live Forever?” (<http://tinyurl.com/pyr96a8>), Sherwin Nuland writes, “I should declare here that I have no desire to live beyond the life span that nature has granted to our species. For reasons that are pragmatic, scientific, demographic, economic,



political, social, emotional, and secularly spiritual, I am committed to the notion that both individual fulfillment and the ecological balance of life on this planet are best served by dying when our inherent biology decrees that we do" (2). Consider this quote and your own beliefs about death. If a cure were available, would you accept or reject it? Would a cure allow for individual fulfillment and ecological balance, or are these two things fundamentally incompatible? As Nuland did in the quote above, provide specific, researchable reasons for your stance.

5. "The pope today issued his strongest condemnation yet of the so-called cure for death, officially codifying it as a sin and promising to excommunicate permanently from the Roman Catholic Church anyone found to have received it, including priests" (Magary 12). Is the cure fundamentally incompatible with religion and spirituality? Consider this question and examine several different religious groups and predict how these factions would likely react to a cure for aging. Would religious establishments adapt to the reality of the cure or would they likely become obsolete?

V. SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Interview the Elderly

"You know I got laughed at the other day? I was walking to the supermarket and there was a group of kids outside the store. They couldn't have been more than twelve. And they just sat there and laughed at me, calling me 'old man' and all that garbage'" (Magary 97).

John's father discusses the disdain for old age that is prevalent throughout the world depicted in *The Postmortal*. Unfortunately, the devaluing of the elderly is also common in our society. To combat this, have students interview several older community members. The overall purpose of this activity is to have students humanize those who are commonly marginalized, and to attack the false notion that growing older lacks value.

- First, have students identify and contact potential interviewees. These individuals could be older faculty members, family members, community members, etc.
- Next, have students draft a list of ten to fifteen interview questions. These questions should be constructed so they elicit thoughtful responses and reflect the overall goal of the activity. For a list of questions that students could use or model their own after, consult <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>.

- Finally, students should perform the interview. They could record the conversation via a smartphone app, or they could transcribe on paper or a digital document. If students have a Google account, they could easily compose questions and responses on a Google Document to share with an instructor. Also, if the interviewee is comfortable being videotaped, the entire conversation could be filmed (iMovie, for example, allows for easy filming and editing).
- Lastly, students should evaluate the interview and select portions to present to the larger campus community. As students edit, have them consider the most valuable, or enlightening, segments of the interview; they should also pay close attention to portions that challenge common assumptions about the elderly. If the interview was filmed, students could edit and present their footage. If transcribed, the interview could be edited and displayed via a resource such as <http://www.prezi.com>.

2. Examine Youth, Aging, and Media

"Next to the casino floor at the Fountain of Youth is a stadium-sized mall that houses nothing but shops selling cure-related merchandise. You can get your pick of commemorative T-shirts (I'M HOT... AND I'M STAYING THAT WAY is a popular choice), steel cookware with a lifetime warranty, go-tox clinics for older post-mortals..." (Magary 89).

While John only spends a brief time in the Fountain of Youth, the name of the resort symbolizes the obsession with youthfulness that permeates both the fictional world of the book and the real world we inhabit. This activity is designed to provoke students to examine their own assumptions about youthfulness and how these assumptions are shaped by popular culture.

First, have students consider these two questions:

1. What thoughts and feelings do you have about aging?
2. What messages are transmitted about youth and aging through popular media?

Note: As students consider this second question, have them examine a variety of different media sources including music videos and advertisements. Have them perform a YouTube search to find videos for popular songs pertaining to youth and aging such as Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream" and Jay-Z's "Young Forever."

<http://tinyurl.com/oh5g2mw> will expose students to a variety of different advertisements pertaining to aging.

- If only a single class is participating in this activity, students could respond to these questions and share in person or through an online learning platform such as Moodle. Conversations across classrooms could occur on a free collaborative website such as <https://piazza.com/>.



A larger discussion spanning the entire campus could occur in a forum on the university's Facebook page.

- As conversations unfold, and students unpack their own beliefs and the cultural messages that have shaped them, have them construct their own music videos or advertisements to counter and complicate popular messages regarding youth and aging. Students could use iMovie to create videos, and programs such as Microsoft Publisher could be used to create counter-advertisements. Their movies could be displayed on the university's website, and advertisements could be printed and displayed around campus or even in the surrounding community.

3. Become an Expert and Educator

Have students select a topic related to *The Postmortal* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- Assisted Suicide
- Ageism
- Genetic Engineering
- Transhumanism
- Terrorism

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of *The Postmortal* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group's topic?
2. What are controversial elements of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites them to pick a side. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as <https://www.lucidpress.com/pages/examples/free-brochure-maker-online> will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher.
- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through <http://www.prezi.com> or Google Slides (<http://www.google.com/slides/about/>). Or, have them design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short

sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and represent knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include <http://piktochart.com> and <http://easel.ly>. Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in debate.

4. Become an Environmental Advocate

"Because while we may now have a virtually unlimited lifespan, our natural resources almost certainly do not. Gas. Clean water. Land. Mother Nature has blessed us with only a finite amount of each of these things. We have known, long before this cure was discovered, that we have been consuming resources at an unsustainable pace—a pace that will now quicken at an unimaginable rate" (Magary 67)

Unfortunately, the environmental challenges detailed in the book are merely heightened versions of those currently facing us. Have students work collaboratively to identify and analyze a current environmental challenge (dwindling non-renewable resources, climate change, limited access to clean drinking water, etc.), and propose ways to address it. Use the following questions to facilitate the activity:

- What is the challenge you have identified? What related research (interviewing primary sources, distributing surveys, analyzing data, etc.) have you performed, and what did it reveal?
- What specific changes should occur? Consider interventions at local, state, and national levels.
- Realistically, how can these changes be facilitated?

Students should present their findings and recommendations to peers and instructors, but they should also share information with the larger community and encourage action. To do so, students could:

- Write op-eds to local newspapers
- Compose e-mails to local and state representatives
- Use social media to educate community members
- Produce and upload a short documentary to YouTube
- Write petitions using websites such as <http://www.moveon.org> or <http://www.change.org>.
- Engage in a related service-learning project. For a thorough list of possible activities, consult this resource: <http://tinyurl.com/lmhstofm>



5. Death Education

“‘Okay,’ I confessed. ‘You got me. I don’t want to die. I’m terrified of death. I fear there’s nothing beyond it and that this existence is the only one I’ll ever possess. That’s why I’m here’” (Magary 8).

The fear of death that motivates John to receive the cure is familiar to most human beings. While aware of our own mortality, the death experience remains something that commonly provokes anxiety, fear, and avoidance. Have students confront death, and the process of dying, by having them volunteer with the terminally ill. Students could utilize one of the following resources to locate local volunteer opportunities.

- <http://www.volunteermatch.org/>
By entering keywords such as “terminal,” “hospice,” or “nursing home,” students can locate related volunteer opportunities anywhere in the United States.
- <http://hospicefoundation.org/Hospice-Directory>
This website lists state hospice organizations that students can contact to inquire about local volunteer opportunities.
- <http://wish.org/ways-to-help/volunteering>
The volunteer information page for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America.

During their experience, have students document and reflect in a daily journal; if they use Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), students can compose in digital form and share their writing with instructors and peers. When their volunteering experience ends, students could provide a final reflection via a Google Slides presentation. Have them consider their most striking observations/experiences, and ask students to reflect on how these experiences changed, or confirmed, their thoughts and feelings related to death and dying.

VI. OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following are resources useful for extending a study of *The Postmortal* and its many related subjects:

- *The Postmortal* book trailer from Penguin Books USA
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JzgVVpqX58>
- WUTC audio Interview with Drew Magary
<http://wutc.org/post/postmortal-paints-terrifyingly-realistic-picture-immortality>
- The A.V. Club interview with Drew Magary
<http://www.avclub.com/article/drew-magary-65202>
- A FRONTLINE exploration of assisted suicide
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/suicide-plan/>

- “Why Do Americans Balk at Euthanasia Laws?” *New York Times*, Room for Debate
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/04/10/why-do-americans-balk-at-euthanasia-laws>
- “What Happens When We All Live to 100?”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/09/what-happens-when-we-all-live-to-100/379338/>
- “The Recipe For Immortality: An expert in synthetic biology explains how people could soon live for centuries.”
<http://discovermagazine.com/2012/oct/20-the-recipe-for-immortality>
- TED Talk from anti-aging researcher Aubrey de Grey
http://www.ted.com/talks/aubrey_de_grey_says_we_can_avoid_aging?language=en
- “Should We Live to 1,000?”
<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-ethics-of-anti-aging-by-peter-singer>
- “The College Course That’s All About Death”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/01/the-college-course-thats-all-about-death/282980/>
- Psychiatrist John Wynn’s discussion on death, mortality, and meaning
<http://www.tedmed.com/talks/show?id=7273>
- Holy Sonnets: “Death, be not proud” by John Donne
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173363>
- “Why we need to address population growth’s effects on global warming”
<http://touch.latimes.com/#section/-1/article/p2p-82617356/>
- “Study Says Curbing Population Growth Won’t Help Address Climate Change”
<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/10/31/3587180/study-population-growth/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Chris Gilbert has taught high school English for the past nine years in Asheville, North Carolina. He is also an avid writer. His work has appeared in *The Washington Post’s* education blog, “The Answer Sheet,” NCTE’s (National Council of Teachers of English) *English Journal*, and he has also written a Penguin Teacher’s Guide to *Cyrano de Bergerac* and a First Year and Common Reading Resource Guide to *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*. He is a 2013 recipient of NCTE’s Paul and Kate Farmer Writing Award.