

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# “Hope is contagious”



*How do you feel when you are working by yourself on something that is important to you? How do you feel when you find someone who is also passionate about the same activity or cause?*

*Many people tend to feel better when they work on something together with one or more people. Why do you think this is?*

## Who is Greta Thunberg?

At age 15, Greta Thunberg began skipping school every Friday to stand outside the Swedish parliament, protesting against political inaction over the climate crisis. She started alone with a sign that translates as “School Strike for Climate.” She soon sparked an international movement led by youth, the Student Strikes for Climate and Fridays for Future, which have now taken place in dozens of countries globally.

Greta has been invited to speak at many important events, including at the United Nations.



## Who is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?



At age 29, the youngest woman ever to serve in the US Congress! She’s the Democratic Representative for New York’s 14th congressional district. She is the youngest woman ever to serve in the US Congress. She has been in office for less than a year and has already generated a huge amount of news coverage.

Her proposed climate change action plan, called the “Green New Deal,” calls for, among other things, the achievement of net-zero greenhouse gases within a decade, a full transition off of fossil fuels, and commitments to ensure all old and new buildings in the US meet new energy-efficient standards.

The following text is a transcript from a video call between two climate activists. One is America’s youngest-ever congresswoman, the other is a Swedish high school student and climate activist.

In this call, two of the world’s most powerful voices on the climate emergency speak for the first time!

**Check out a cool podcast with BC youth!**  
[sierraclub.bc.ca/podcast-youth-up-front](http://sierraclub.bc.ca/podcast-youth-up-front)

Transcript adapted from: “When Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez met Greta Thunberg: ‘Hope is Contagious,’” by Emma Brockes in *The Guardian* (June 29, 2019).

**Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** It's such an honour to meet you!

**Greta Thunberg** You, too!

**AOC** Thank you. I'm so excited to be having this conversation. I remember first hearing your speech a few months ago...and I was thrilled, because here in the United States, even when I was running, people were saying there's no need to convey this kind of urgency [about the climate]. To hear you articulate the belief that I've had as well is so exciting and validating.

**GT** Thank you so much for standing up and offering hope to so many people, even here in Sweden.

**AOC** People often say, "Don't politicise young people." It's almost a taboo. I find it very condescending, as though, especially in this day and age with the access to information we have, you can't form your own opinions and advocate for yourself. I'm interested in how you approach that.

**GT** The most common criticism I get is that I'm being manipulated and you shouldn't use children in political ways, and I can't think for myself and so on. And I think that is so annoying! I'm also allowed to have a say – why shouldn't I be able to form my own opinion and try to change people's minds?

**AOC** What is the most effective tactic in gaining attention for the environmental movement?

**GT** I think this whole movement in which I just sat down in front of the parliament, alone had a huge impact, because people saw it and were moved, and became emotional. Millions of children around the world, [are] striking and saying, "Why should we study for a future that may not exist any more?"

**AOC** A lot of people talk about Sweden and other Nordic countries as an inspiration. People say that [advanced thinking around the climate crisis] could never happen in the US, because of the racial diversity here, and issues with immigration and so on, there's no way we can come together in order to combat this. I'm interested in [your] response to that.

**GT** Many people see countries like Sweden or Norway or Finland as role models [because] we have such a clean energy sector. That may be true, but Sweden is one of the top 10 countries in the world when it comes to the highest ecological footprints.

In Sweden, the most common argument that we shouldn't act is that we are such a small country with only 10 million inhabitants – we should focus more on helping other countries. That is so incredibly frustrating, because why should we argue about who or what needs to change first? Why not take the leading role?

**AOC** We hear the same exact argument here. But are we going to choose to lead, or are we going to sit on our hands? It seems as if [many people in the U.S.A.] take pride in leading on fracking, on being the number one in oil, in consumption, in single-use plastics. But they don't seem to want to take pride in leading on the environment and leading for our children.

**GT** Yes. I mean, countries like Sweden or the US, since we are rich countries, need to go first. Because people in poor countries need to be able to raise their standard of living. We have a duty to lead when we already have, basically, everything.

## What makes video calls so awesome?

Video calls make it possible to see and speak to someone on the opposite side of the planet without having to fly there to meet them in person, which creates a significant amount of carbon emissions that fuel climate change. The amount of carbon emissions we create is sometimes referred to as our "carbon footprint" or "ecological footprint." Video calls offer us a fantastic opportunity to collaborate "face-to-face" while barely increasing your carbon footprint, in ways that weren't possible even 10 years ago.

**AO**C Yes. People think of leadership as this glamorous, powerful thing. Leadership is also enormously difficult. Leadership is a responsibility. Leadership is about doing things before anybody else does them...taking decisions when you don't know 100% what the outcome is going to be.

I'm curious, given how daunting the issue [of climate change] is, why aren't you so filled with despair that you're staying on your couch every day, and just waiting for the apocalypse? [Laughs]

**GT** Before I started school striking, I was like that. I was so depressed and I didn't want to do anything. But what I find encouraging is having all these people who are fighting on different sides in different ways, to create a better future.

The school-striking children, when I see them – that is very hopeful. [P]eople are very unaware of the climate crisis...people aren't continuing like this and not doing anything because they are evil. We are doing it simply because we are unaware. I think that is very hopeful, because once we know, once we realise, then we change, then we act.

**AO**C Hope is something that you create, with your actions. Hope is something you have to manifest into the world, and once one person has hope, it can be contagious. Other people start acting in a way that has more hope.

**GT** Yeah. I know so many people who feel hopeless, and they ask me, "What should I do?" And I say: "Act. Do something." Because that is the best medicine against sadness and depression.

**AO**C Why do you think young people have been more powerful and persuasive on this issue, in particular?

**GT** Many reasons, but I think the main one is that...[m]ost of us know that this is going to affect us in our lifetimes...it's already here and it's going to get worse, and...as young people, we aren't as used to the system. We don't say, "It's always been like this, we can't change anything."

**AO**C [Y]outh is a mindset... we haven't seen the world before, this is our first



*Above: protesters outside the BC Legislature in May 2019*

path, and so we [tend] to question all the nonsensical things that have just gone on for reasons of outdated logic. You can be much older and still part of a youth movement, if you refuse to do things just because that's the way they've always been done... Social movements, and youth movements in particular, should continue to be the moral compass that guides our vision.

**GT** Yes, it always reminds me a lot of the Emperor's New Clothes. Everyone believes in this lie, that only a child dares to question.

**AO**C Right. When I was first running [for office], people often mocked me as a child. I'm much older than you! But I was still very young for someone who was running for such a powerful seat. [People's criticism] was "all veiled ways of saying I was too inexperienced, too naive, too young, and too powerless."

*Thunberg says that she is planning to travel to the US in August, so she can attend the UN Climate Action Summit on 23 September.*

**GT** I don't fly for climate reasons so it's not 100% yet, but we are figuring it out. It's very hard, but I think it should be possible.

**AOC** That's incredible. Let us know how we can help from over here. I think one of the things that we need to start communicating is that this a global struggle, and it's not about what is Sweden doing, and what is the US doing – it's about what are all of us doing, as one movement? I think the power of that is very real. I wish you well.

**GT** Thank you so much.

**AOC** Thank you so much, Greta. Be sure to let us know when you have an arrival date. If you land in New York, we will give you a Queens' welcome!

**Update:** On August 28, 2019, Thunberg did arrive in the US! She chose not to fly in an airplane in order to avoid greatly increasing her carbon footprint. Instead, Thunberg sailed across the Atlantic Ocean for 14 days from Plymouth, UK to New York, US in a 60 foot racing yacht equipped with solar panels and underwater turbines.

While in the Americas, Thunberg will be attending the UN Climate Action Summit in **New York City** (September 23). She will then travel to **Montreal, Quebec** to take part in a major climate strike on September 27. This is mobilization is part of the Global Climate Strike week of events happening around the world from September 20 to 27. Thunberg is also planning to attend the United Nations COP25 climate change conference held from December 2 to 14 in **Santiago, Chile**.

## Reading comprehension questions:

1. How do Thunberg and Ocasio-Cortez describe some adults' reactions to their respective efforts to raise awareness about climate change?

- What does she mean when she says people think she is “being manipulated” and that she can't think for herself?
- Have you ever felt as though adults or older siblings thought you couldn't think for yourself? How did that situation make you feel?

2. Thunberg mentions that in Sweden, many people think their country doesn't need to act because it's so small (only 10 million inhabitants), and that it “should focus more on helping other countries.” Thunberg says this “is so incredibly frustrating.” Why does she believe it is important for people in smaller countries like Sweden to take climate action?

Compared to many countries, Canada's population is small. Our population is 37.4 million inhabitants, Compare this to 329 million people in the USA, 132 million in Mexico, or 212 million in Brazil. There are 1.42 billion people in China, and 1.36 million people in India. **Should only countries with the biggest populations take action on climate change?**

3. Thunberg says people in “rich” countries need to take climate action first. In your own words, what is her argument for this?

- Give an example of something that contributes to the large carbon footprints of many people in Canada as a result of our lifestyles or standards of living. What are some lifestyles/standards of living that some people in “poorer” or less-developed countries may not have?

What are some actions you, your friends and family could take to reduce your carbon footprints?

3. Extension: Thunberg makes a simplified argument that people in “rich” countries already have “basically, everything.” What are some of the inequalities that exist within Canada and within your local community? Discuss with a partner and then as a class.

4. Ocasio-Cortez says, “I’ve always felt that social movements, and youth movements in particular, should continue to be the moral compass that guides our vision.” What do you think she means by this? Explain in your own words and give examples.

5. Does Thunberg believe most people in the world don’t care about the health of the planet and how their actions affect climate change? Is she stressed out or hopeful about the potential of climate action?

## Suggested answer key for teachers:

**Question 1.** Thunberg and Ocasio-Cortez describe many adults' reactions to their respective actions about climate change.

- When Thunberg says people think she is “being manipulated” she means that many adults think her climate action is political, and that children and youth should not be involved in politics. She implies that some people think other people are using or manipulating her to get her to spread a message, when in reality, she is very determined to spread her conviction that all of humanity must take action to address climate change.
- Ocasio-Cortez says many people in the United States think young people should not be involved in politics (“Don’t politicise young people. It’s almost a taboo”). She thinks this is insulting (“I find it very condescending”) because in the digital age young people have access to information that can help them to form their own opinions and advocate for themselves.
- Students should include their own example of a situation when they felt that adults or older siblings thought that they couldn’t think for themselves and how that situation made them feel.

**Question 2.** Thunberg believes that, even though Sweden has a relatively small population, it is important for people in Sweden to take climate action because “Sweden is one of the top 10 countries in the world when it comes to the highest ecological footprints.” Thunberg says that many Swedes believe that “we should focus more on helping other countries;” she finds this frustrating because she doesn’t believe “[Swedes] should argue about who or what needs to change first.” Her attitude is that her fellow citizens could take a leading role in climate action (“Why not take the leading role?”).

**Question 3.** Thunberg believes people in “rich” countries need to take climate action first because “people in poor countries need to be able to raise their standard of living. We have a duty to lead when we already have, basically, everything.” By this she is implying that most people in “rich” countries already have housing, clean drinking water, access to food, clothing and schooling, many luxuries, and benefits that people in other countries do not have (protection of basic human rights, freedom from war, access to technology, etc.)

**Extension:** Thunberg makes a simplified argument that people in ‘rich’ countries already have “basically, everything.” Discuss some of the inequalities that exist within Canada and within your local community. Have students discuss with a partner and then as a class (or perhaps organize a debate).

Thunberg also stated that ‘rich countries’ have the largest ecological footprints in the world (meaning they consume more resources and their actions result in the release of more greenhouse gases than the actions of people in less-developed countries). Some examples of lifestyles or standards of living that many Canadians have that people in less-developed countries may not have are:

- Many Canadian families have one or more personal vehicles per family. Taking public transit helps limit a person’s carbon footprint. It is possible to take public transit instead of using personal vehicles that typically run on gas or diesel.
- Many Canadians take trips by plane each year. When one person flies on a plane from Vancouver to Toronto, about 1 tonne of carbon is released into the atmosphere. This is more than individuals in many countries emit in an entire year! This released carbon contributes to the ‘greenhouse effect’ that causes global warming or climate change. Canada has some breathtaking natural places and fascinating city culture that we could all learn to appreciate more instead of taking so many vacations abroad on planes and cruise ships.

- Many Canadians live in single family homes that offer ample living space per person, increasing the resources and energy required for heating and cooling. Living in an apartment building is often more energy-efficient. It is important for all buildings to have good insulation to reduce the need for heating and cooling.
- Many Canadians use precious water resources to water their lawn to keep it green year-round, although increasingly we are seeing water saving measures mandated by local governments due to drought. Many people around the world lack a reliable supply of fresh drinking water to meet their basic daily needs.

Ask students to suggest some actions that they, their friends and families could take to reduce their ecological footprints and/or climate change. For example:

- Take public transit or ride a bike to work and school, instead of driving in a personal vehicle
- Fly less (or not at all)
- Eat food that is produced close to home (and not shipped from distant continents)
- Better insulate their homes to reduce the energy used for heating and cooling (often there are government programs to help make this more affordable)
- Switch to renewable energy resources (hydro, solar, wind, geothermal, biomass).

**Question 4.** Ocasio-Cortez says, “I’ve always felt that social movements, and youth movements in particular, should continue to be the moral compass that guides our vision.” Ask students to explain what they think she means by this in their own words and give examples.

- Ocasio mentions that “many of us [young people] understand that [climate change] is going to make our lives much worse...as young people, we aren’t as used to the system,” meaning that youth tend to see when the status quo, normalized systems of society may not be logical or be running with the best interests of the general public in mind.

Some possible answers of how youth have taken action to advance society include:

- High school students David Shepherd and Travis Price of Nova Scotia started a day to raise awareness about homophobic bullying called **Pink Shirt Day** in 2007, now marked across the country.
- **Orange Shirt Day** was started in 2013 to educate people and promote awareness about the Indian residential school system and the impact this system had on Indigenous communities for more than a century in Canada. It is held annually on September 30. Students and staff are encouraged to wear an orange shirt to school that day to honour residential school survivors.
- In June 1903, 100,000 textile workers in Philadelphia (including 10,000 workers under 15) went on strike to demand better pay and a 55-hour work week (rather than 60). They exposed the inhumanity of child labour (common at the time) and furthered the push to ban child labor practices.
- In July 2013, youth across North America began taking part in the **Black Lives Matter** movement to demand equal rights and dignity for African Americans. This built on the legacy of the 20th century civil rights movement.
- In April 2016, Indigenous youth in the US protested at **Standing Rock** in South Dakota to express opposition to the Dakota Access pipeline, fearing it would contaminate drinking water. They gained international attention for their courageous efforts in defending nature and in “reshaping the national conversation for any environmental project that would cross the Native American land.”
- In February 2018, youth in the US created the movement “**Never Again**” to protest gun violence after the Parkland, Florida high school shooting.
- Youth climate activist Greta Thunberg launched the global climate strike movement **#Fridaysforfuture** in 2018. It has now become a worldwide movement.