A.A. 2018-2019 **Reading Comprehension TEXT 2**

**Are the days of recycling with a clear conscience over?**

*Is recycling supporting unsustainable consumerism?*

There is a recycling crisis and we may have only just noticed. For years we have been recycling, dispelling the guilt generated by our high-consumption lifestyles, as if our actions are somehow good for the environment. [Recycling](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/recycling) is the “green” thing to do. But is our whole recycling culture a shameful illusion that has been masking a growing problem of unsustainable manufacturing and consumerism?

We are discovering that our recycling systems might not be fit for purpose. Retailers and companies producing waste are required to meet obligations according to how much waste they generate. They meet this obligation by buying packaging recovery notes (PRNs) or packaging export recovery notes (Perns). These PRNs are generated every time a tonne of waste is recycled – or so we thought. Exporters of waste are under scrutiny after some have been found sending out shipments of worthless contaminated or mixed waste and [claiming the notes fraudulently](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/18/uk-recycling-industry-under-investigation-for-and-corruption).

The National Audit Office found that about half of the UK’s [plastic recycling is sent abroad](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jul/23/uks-plastic-waste-may-be-dumped-overseas-instead-of-recycled) but there is little assurance of what actually happens to it. Many countries in the developing world routinely dump waste into rivers and oceans. About 90% of ocean plastic started out inland and made its way to the ocean through just 10 rivers. The biggest contributor, the Yangtze in China, discharges a staggering 1.5m tonnes of plastic into the ocean every year.

And it’s not just plastics. We export a number of other commonly recycled materials, including paper, glass and electronic waste, with faith that it is being dealt with in a sustainable manner.

So what does happen to it? We might imagine our hi-tech devices undergo hi-tech reprocessing, but the reality is far from ideal. Just like plastics, most of our “e-waste” has been shipped to China. The city of Guiyu was a major hub for recycling international e-waste, with terrible consequences for the local environment: poisoned water and land, and [high levels of lead in the blood samples](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1913570/) of 80% of local children. This route was cut off in January 2018, when China decided that the environmental costs of accepting the world’s waste was not worth the profit, especially as it has its own growing stream of toxic e-waste to deal with. But this has not stopped us producing e-waste: in 2018 [it is estimated](https://www.statista.com/statistics/499891/projection-ewaste-generation-worldwide/) that we will produce 50m tonnes globally. We have simply found new routes to dispose of the stuff.

After China’s ban on importing recyclable materials, a huge wave of US and European e-waste [found its way to Thailand](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/28/deluge-of-electronic-waste-turning-thailand-into-worlds-rubbish-dump), where hundreds of facilities have been set up to operate crude, low-cost recycling processes. These include recovering copper and other metals from cables and circuit boards by burning the plastics away, producing highly toxic fumes of dioxins and furans and heavy metals. Acid baths that strip out metals expose workers to acrid and toxic fumes. Thailand is now taking rapid steps [to close its borders](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/16/thailand-ban-imports-electronic-waste-southeast-asia-nations/) too. With more routes for our waste closed, we need to consider more sustainable solutions closer to home.

The truth is, if we dealt with our waste on our own soil it would cost more. Recycling abroad, in countries with inexpensive labour and less regulation, is cheaper. This has become the norm, giving us a route to jettison our waste plastic, electronic goods, metals, paper and glass under the banner of recycling with a clear conscience. Meanwhile, we shop for cheap replacement goods. The illusion that we can recycle so easily has enabled us to continue to consume and as we see more countries refusing our waste, the problems are stacking up – literally.

One way to reduce waste is to stem the flow of mass-produced cheap products, at least until we have a solution. Prices should reflect life-cycle costs. Higher prices would mean we buy less, but value those goods more. We would hang on to things. Disposable items such as single-use plastics would be uneconomical and we would reuse more. This also cuts across those business models that rely on fast product turnover, especially in electronics (the fastest growing source of waste). This might create some economic disruption in the short term, but would open up new business opportunities around reusing, repairing and locally recycling goods. It would certainly stem the rising tide of unsustainable “recycling”.

***First and second-language students are asked to answer the true/false statements***

**Now read the following statements and write TRUE or FALSE after each of them.**

1. Thanks to many years experience, the British recycling systems are effective and environmentally friendly.

1. According to the writer, reducing the flow of mass-produced cheap products would not necessarily create long-term economic disruption.

***Third-language students are asked to answer the following questions.***

**Now answer the following in your own words.**

1. Why might UK recycling systems ‘not be fit for purpose’?
2. How, according to the writer, could the flow of mass-produced cheap products be reduced?