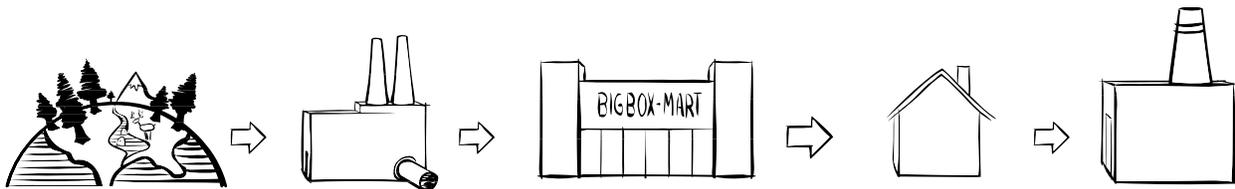
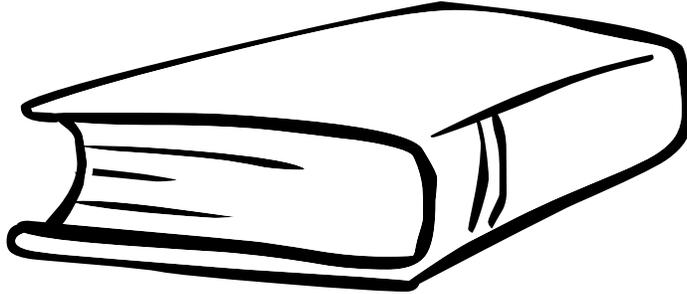


# THE STORY OF STUFF

## Reading Guide



*This reading group guide for **The Story of Stuff** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Annie Leonard. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*



## Introduction

Where do our computers, soda cans, and T-shirts come from? Who and what was involved in their production? How far did they travel to reach us? And where will they go when we throw them away? Annie Leonard, creator of the internet film sensation "The Story of Stuff," takes readers on an epic journey around the world and back in time to understand our consumption-driven economy. Her conclusion is clear: we have too much Stuff, too much of it is toxic and we're not sharing it well.

With staggering revelations about the economy, the environment, and cultures around the world, alongside stories from her own life and work, Leonard demonstrates that the drive for a "growth at all costs" economy fuels a rampant expansion of production, consumption, and disposal that is jeopardizing our health, our happiness and the very survival of the planet's ecosystems.

**Yet there is hope.** Nearly every page offers alternatives and solutions that can stop the environmental damage, social injustice, and health hazards we face. Our system is in crisis, but this is not the way things have to be, and Annie Leonard shows us another way.

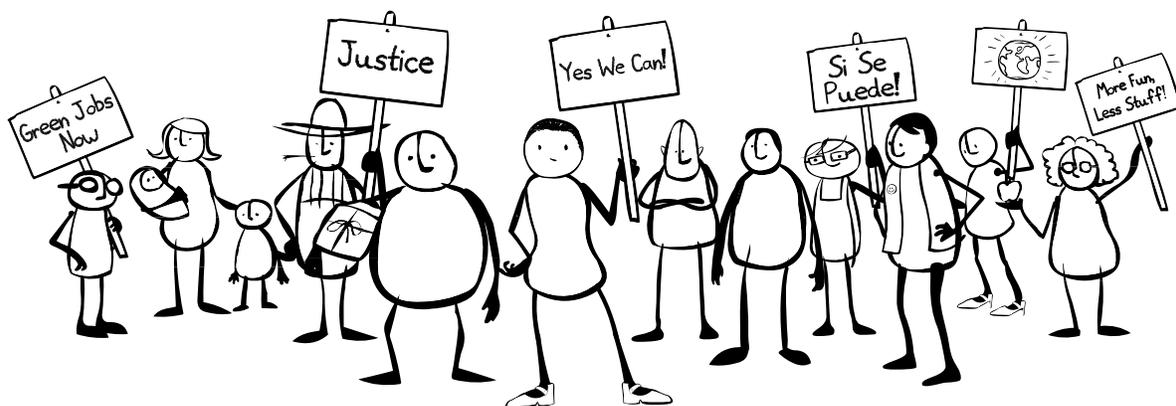
## Questions for Discussion

1. In the Introduction, Annie describes how her professional path led her from specialized expertise in one specific field-- garbage-- to a much broader interdisciplinary focus. How has your career path developed? From general knowledge towards specialization, or the reverse (like Annie)? If you are currently a specialist with narrower expertise, what are the pros and cons of focusing on one area so closely? How might you expand your focus? Which fields seem connected to your own? How did expanding her knowledge to include other connected fields benefit Annie? How might it benefit you?
2. What do you think about Annie's claim in the Introduction that capitalism is the "Economic-System-That-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Can you recall discussing this economic system with your family, friends, colleagues or neighbors? If not, what holds you back? Is it a taboo, or a lack of information, or something else? Do you feel more able to talk about the pros and cons of the capitalist economic system after having read The Story of Stuff? And has reading The Story of Stuff made you re-think the qualities of a successful economic model?
3. Do you consider yourself a consumer? How so? After reading about the original meaning of the word "consume" in the Introduction, has your feeling about being a "consumer" changed at all? Clearly everyone needs to consume to live; what kinds of consumption are healthy and what kinds less healthy?
4. Many of Annie's stories involve travel to other countries where she witnesses people living with fewer resources (like fresh water) and less Stuff. Have you travelled to places where you've noticed differences in Stuff, such as the access to resources, or the amount of advertising, or the types of things available to purchase? If so, how did the people there seem to deal with these different circumstances? Did they seem unhappier, happier, or the same as folks back home? What lessons can you draw from your observations of life in the U.S. and elsewhere?
5. Annie describes "externalized costs" as a major reason why our current economic system is unsustainable. These hidden costs, which are almost never represented in the price of Stuff we buy, accumulate at every stage in a product's life, from Extraction to Disposal. Pick a product that you recently purchased. How much did you pay for it? Based on what you learned from Annie, what kinds of costs were likely hidden or externalized? What do you think the pricetag would be if those costs were internalized? Would you still have bought it if it cost that much? Would you be willing to pay more for goods if you knew they were manufactured in a safe and healthy way? And if they lasted longer?
6. One of the most poignant threads in the book concentrates on Haiti. (pp. 49-50; pp. 136 - 139; pp. 224-227 in hardcover) Has your opinion of the economic struggles that Haiti faces changed since

reading *The Story of Stuff*? What kinds of assumptions do you see at work in media coverage of affairs in Haiti? Now that you know more, are there pieces of the Haiti story you notice missing from the mainstream news coverage?

7. Has reading about the production of gold and diamond jewelry, T-shirts, books, aluminum cans, computers/electronics, cosmetics, and vinyl/PVC changed your attitude about these products? How so? Has your experience of shopping changed since reading the book? How so? Have you told anyone about the risks or back-stories associated with these products? If so, how did it feel to share that information? How did the other person respond?
8. Have you ever lived near or visited someplace near a factory or a dump? What did you notice about the air quality, the tapwater, the people who lived there, and the kinds of housing and amenities nearby?
9. Did the section on U.S. government regulation (pp 94-100) surprise you? What kinds of laws and agencies do you believe would best protect you and your family? What role do you think government has, and/or should have, in ensuring our products are safe and our air and water is clean?
10. Before reading *The Story of Stuff*, had you heard much about international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF or regulatory agreements such as GATT or the WTO? Where were they mentioned and how were they depicted? Did you have a sense of how they impacted individual human lives? Do you have a sense now, after reading Annie's take on them? How do you think they impact your own life? Do these organizations and agreements concern you? How?
11. Are you aware of a local economy functioning in your community? For example, is there food produced nearby that is available at farmers' markets or in restaurants? Do you know where the electricity that powers your home comes from? Are there artisans making products locally? Where do they get their materials? How has this changed over time?
12. Since reading the book, do you have a different awareness of advertising? Do you notice ads that seem manipulative? That try to make you feel bad about yourself? How? Are there ads you'd rather your family not be exposed to? Which ones? Are there some places – perhaps public areas? school buses? – that should be off limits to commercial advertisements?
13. In the chapter on Consumption, Annie posits that, for most of us, our consumer muscle is stronger and more developed than our citizen muscle. Of these two, which muscle is better developed in you? When you think of yourself and the broader society, do you see yourself more as a consumer or a citizen? In each role, what do you think the role of government really is? What should the top priorities of government and the economy be, in your opinion?

14. The Epilogue includes a number of significant changes we could make to fix our unsustainable system, such as separating full benefits from full-time employment. Can you see yourself working less than full-time? How many hours per week would you work, in an ideal world? What are some of the pros and cons of reducing your work hours, if this were an option?
15. Having read about all the parts of the Materials Economy, which places do you fit into the system? (For example, perhaps you are involved in Distribution because you work at a retail store, or produce advertising. You are almost certainly involved in Consumption and Disposal.) Which part of the system are you most concerned about? Is it toxics in toys or cosmetics? Or the rights and living conditions of factory workers? Or? Where do you see opportunities to get involved and make changes?
16. Do you feel more or less empowered to change things for the better after reading The Story of Stuff?



## Additional Activities: Enhance Your Book Club

1. Visit [waterfootprint.org](http://waterfootprint.org) and calculate your personal water footprint. Is yours higher or lower than Annie's (500 cubic meters per year)(on pp 17-18 in hardcover)? Based on her description of her lifestyle, what would you guess accounts for the difference between yours and hers? Can you think of ways you could decrease your footprint?
2. Calculate how many hours per week you spend shopping, how many you spend per week watching TV, and how many hours you spend per week in other leisure activities like playing sports or games, hanging out with friends or family, going to museums or performances, playing games with your kids, etc. Does the ratio between these three categories (shopping, TV, leisure other than TV) seem right to you? If not, set some goals that will shift this ratio to one that seems healthier and more fulfilling.
3. Spread out a tarp or plastic trashbag and empty the contents of a random wastebasket from your home onto it. You might want to wear gloves for this. Divide the contents by types of material. What do you think could be reclaimed to be used again? Recycled? Composted? Repurposed? Avoided in the first place? What changes in the design stage could have made the products easier to handle safely at the end of their useful life?
4. Organize a visit to your local dump or Materials Recovery Facility (MRF). Almost all of them offer tours to the community if you call ahead. What are your impressions after your visit? How did it make you feel?
5. Re-read Annie's "New World Vision" (pp. 247-250 in hardcover). Then close your eyes and picture your ideal neighborhood or community. Write it down and/or share it with your group. What commonalities are there between your visions?



## A Conversation with Annie Leonard

### 1. Did the timing of this book have anything to do with the economic crash in 2008?

The exact timing of the crash was hard to predict but that we were on a collision course was clear to many observers. We're dealing with the inevitable fallout of out-of-control consumer spending and an economic model that privileges corporate profit over community wellbeing, environmental health and secure meaningful jobs.

So, the timing of the book release wasn't intentionally linked to the crash, but grew out of an urgent need to address this system that's clearly in crisis. However, the timing definitely helped the book's message land with a receptive audience. With increasing news about environmental and health problems, mounting rates increasing and families struggling to hold on to their houses, we found a ripe audience to question the system as it is.

The current economic downturn has created widespread hardship and increased economic inequity. One silver lining of this disaster is that it inspired people to be more frugal-- for example to seek out repair shops, to hold onto goods longer rather than replace them for the latest style, to rethink every day consumption habits. It has inspired us to think more about stewardship, frugality and responsible choices – all things that we're going to need much more of in the coming years.

### 2. Which word better describes you: realist, or optimist? What about: environmentalist, or social commentator?

Do I have to choose? I think I am all of those things, if that doesn't sound grandiose.

Working on The Story of Stuff fuels my optimism: the fact that the film has been seen over 12 million times and the flood of supportive emails and letters from all over the world is so inspiring! I'm convinced that the vast majority of people on the planet prefer life over ecological destruction; collaboration over domination; justice over environmental and economic inequity; and community and friends over more Stuff. On the technological side, there are so many causes for optimism: clean and renewable energy, green chemistry, models for safe, low-waste manufacturing processes... The list goes on and on. Solutions abound! Anyone who says there are no alternatives isn't looking for one. We simply don't have to trash the planet and endure massive social inequality; these realities are the result of specific choices made by government and business leaders over time. Looking ahead, we can make different, and better choices.

But I'm no Pollyanna. I am very clear about the gravity of the challenges we face. The changes to the

climate are dangerously near the tipping point, after which climate chaos will accelerate on its own, without any more human contributions. Poverty and inequality are growing exponentially. We have many institutions in place--including popular culture!-- that encourage unsustainable consumption. We have neglected and corrupted systems of democracy. We suffer from eroded social fabric and unhealthy communities. All these can – and must - be overcome.

As for labels like environmentalist, I started off as a "garbagehead"-- an expert on waste. But as I describe in the book, the harder I looked at the problem, the more I saw how it was connected to the whole economic system, which is connected to political systems, and of course all of this impacts the planet and its inhabitants. Consumerism and happiness studies fall somewhere between the social sciences and economics. So the deeper you dig on any issue, the more interdisciplinary you have to be.

**3. Why do you think *The Story of Stuff* has resonated with so many millions of people, when so much environmental information fails to enter the public conversation?**

That's the million dollar question for a lot of my colleagues! I think a big part of the project's success--in addition to the adorable stick figures created by the brilliant people at Free Range Studios--is that we refuse to lead with guilt and fear. The challenges we face are not about individual consumers' "eco-sins" and neither guilt nor fear empower us to make the kind of change we need.

Of course individual choices matter and we should all act responsibly when we decide what to eat, wear, drive, buy, and throw away. But our individual choices are limited and dwarfed by the choices of big economic and political institutions. When I visit Los Angeles, for example, I'd love to take public transit and not sit in smog-belching traffic jams, but I can't because tire and car companies chose to pull up the rail tracks years ago to boost car sales. When I want to buy non-toxic cosmetics, sometimes I can't because FDA and manufactures have decided that it's OK to use toxics without full disclosure on the label. When I want to buy a toaster or cell phone that will last for years, I can't because they all seem to break right after their brief warranty periods end. I refuse to blame the individual when our entire economy right now too often favors the worst options.

So rather than blame people, we focus on empowering them. Too often I think environmentalists cast the public as part of the problem, or at best as apathetic. In our worldview, everyone's a potential hero, and I'm thrilled to see that resonates.

**4. Happiness, contentment, fulfillment-- these are themes that are prominent in the book that are less present in the online films. How does *The Story of Stuff* relate to happiness?**

A lot of details have to be left out of the films in order to make them a palatable length for people to watch online-- that's a big part of why I wrote the book! In fact, the number one complaint I get about the film is that I left something out. Of course I did! Even talking as fast as I do, there's only so much that one can fit into a 20 minute cartoon.

So, yes-- the book, and particularly the chapter on consumption, looks at happiness studies by sociologists and psychologists. Loads of studies document that happiness levels have been declining in the U.S. for decades, in spite of our increase in consumption and resource use. In fact, many studies show strong connections at both an individual and community level between a highly materialistic or consumerist orientation on the one hand, and increased anxiety, insecurity and unhappiness on the other.

In the book I mention the Happy Planet Index. It's basically a measure of how well countries are converting natural resources into happiness. Out of 170 countries examined, the U.S. ranked 150th. That means that 149 countries in this study are more efficient than we are at converting resources into happiness or well-being. I'd posit that those are the countries from which we can learn a thing or two. My mantra: more fun, less Stuff!

5. **Looking forward, we hear a lot of reports that point to Asia as a problem, with growth in consumption there that may well outpace us in the West. What's your response?**

Well, for many people in Asia and in other parts of the world, "more" really does equal "better." Half the world's population still lives on less than \$2 a day. Many people need more food, more clothes, more shelter, more education, more energy, more health care. We in the U.S. have 5 percent of the world's population and are consuming about 30% of the world's resources and making about 30% of the world's waste. That's just plain unfair, and it's an imbalance that does need to be addressed and resolved.

One piece of advice I offer friends in Asia is to take just the best that the West has to offer, not the toxic-laden consumer-crazed pieces of our economy that aren't working. There's amazing innovation in clean energy production, green chemistry, sustainable transportation and much more in the West. Let's share these cutting edge developments rather than the dirty industries that we no longer want. Let's facilitate the rapidly industrializing parts of the world to leap frog over our dirty development stage, to skip the resource intensive, toxic, waste-producing industrial processes and instead invest in the clean, green economy of the future. And in fact, China has established itself as a powerful contender in the field of clean energy. Let's support and learn from those countries investing in real solutions.

**6. Does your being from the West Coast of the US and currently residing in the San Francisco bay area impact your message? Does it impact how people respond to you?**

The awe-inspiring natural beauty that can still be found on the West Coast of the U.S. definitely impacted me as a kid and still does today. Going camping and hiking in the forest is one of my all-time favorite activities. I love the sounds and smells and especially the feeling of humility and groundedness standing under towering redwoods. Knowing nature intimately like this instilled in me a desire to protect it.

While the San Francisco Bay Area does have a reputation for crazy ideas, it is also the place where many great innovations – from recycling to some of the best of high tech – have started. And while some may write off my community-focused lifestyle as a Bay Area anachronism, I'll bet that if they pause to think about it, they will find resonance in many of the values around which I try to organize my life and community. There's nothing radical or hippie about sharing with neighbors, working together to overcome challenges and wanting a clean safe environment for our children. Not just in California, but all over the world, people are finding that once our basic needs are met, working together for a better world is more fun than focusing on just acquiring ever more Stuff.

**7. We know you've discussed it before, but can you talk about your choice to create a book, which is obviously a piece of Stuff?**

Yes: as I've said before, deciding to write a book was not something I took lightly. Not only did it take months of work to sift through the reams of information in these 300 pages, requiring many long nights and missed weekends with my daughter, but printing and shipping it requires energy and materials.

Yet after thinking long and hard about it, I decided that a book's ability to share ideas and inspire action was well worth the investment of time, energy and materials. A book contains far more information than I could fit into a 20 minute cartoon, even talking as fast as I do! After releasing the film, I received tens of thousands of emails and letters from people asking for more information, ideas for getting involved, and examples of solutions. At first, I naively tried to answer them all, working all through the night and not getting near reaching everyone. The format of a book allowed me to share far more information, in far greater depth, which, I hope, will answer viewers' questions and inspire readers to get involved in these issues.

Also, the book breaches the digital divide. Around the world, and even right here in the U.S., millions of people live outside the reach of high speed internet. When I was living in South Asia, my friends and I would often feel frustrated at being excluded from important conversations because we

couldn't download big files or sometimes get on line at all.

Printing a book does consume resources, and this book is an example of how much better book making can be with a publisher committed to reducing environmental impact. When I was meeting potential publishers for this book, some actually rolled their eyes when I insisted the book be printed on 100% post-consumer waste (PCW) paper. Free Press didn't need to be convinced. They came to the meeting with a long list of ideas for reducing materials and energy use throughout the process. The book is printed on 100% PCW, was not chlorine treated, and is printed with soy inks and solvent free glues. This book not only describes how we can make things differently, it models it. Hats off to Free Press for raising the bar on responsible book publication.

**8. Despite your critiques of the U.S. government on issues such as its regulation of toxic materials or its military budget, you call yourself a true patriot. Can you explain this stance?**

I want my country to be the best it can be. Unfortunately, there are a number of things that aren't working well in the United States right now. The metrics on a range of health and social well being indices- obesity, diabetes, depression, income inequality, social isolation, environmental links to cancer, and more – show beyond doubt that we're not on a good trajectory. I believe that pointing this out, calling for things to be done better, demonstrates my commitment and loyalty to this country. I am a true patriot: I want us to fix these problems. I want our American babies to be born healthy. I want people here to have good health care and education and leisure. I want us to enjoy healthy, balanced, and meaningful lives. Asking that we reach higher, do better is a tribute to my sense of this country's potential.

I mean, really: if a ship is headed in the wrong direction, maybe even sinking and someone points out the problems, is she anti-ship? Are those who say we can do better enemies or allies with those on board that ship?

**9. Why do you think you have elicited such vehement negative responses from conservatives?**

The reactions to the Story of Stuff have been as diverse as there are people in the world. We have received hundreds of thousands of appreciative and supportive emails from people all over the planet.

We have also received some emails from thoughtful people who disagreed with some aspect of the film and with whom we had interesting discourse. I welcome the discourse on the tough issues of the day; it helps us all learn more and evolve as a society. We also got a few emails from people who clearly were not thinking critically about the issues I presented. I remember one that said "if you're against stuff, where did you get that shirt you're wearing?" Geez. Can we please get a little deeper

in our discourse here? Of course I am not against stuff; I am against stuff that trashes the planet, wastes resources, poisons people and with which we confuse our self of personal self worth. That doesn't mean I oppose clothes.

In 2009 The New York Times ran a front page story about how widely The Story of Stuff was being used as an educational tool in schools. Which it is; we've been inundated by requests from teachers seeking more information on Story of Stuff topics and we responded by developing a curriculum that's available to download from [storyofstuff.org](http://storyofstuff.org). The NYT article inspired some conservatives to condemn the film and eventually Fox News commentator Glenn Beck added it to his infamous whiteboard chart of what he perceives as a leftist conspiracy to undermine America. Since Beck attacked the Story of Stuff, we've received much more vocal critics. I don't mind criticism; in fact I welcome it as part of a healthy discourse. We need to critique each other, push ourselves to see things from broader perspectives, keep learning and teaching. All that is good. But the latest wave of criticism is not that. We've been receiving extremely angry emails, often threatening violence again me. We have received emails denouncing me as un-American, a traitor, a communist and more.

The angry emails sadden me, not because the authors don't like me, but because they represent a stream of discourse far below the standard I hold for this country. They are full of hatred and intolerance and a refusal to engage reason and science. I worry for our country if we can't sit together and share and debate information respectfully and peacefully. Engaged civic discourse is necessary for a healthy democracy; I had hoped we, as a nation, had evolved far past the era of threatening physical violence against those with whom we disagree.

**10. Now that you've tackled the materials economy and the economic system, what's next for you?**

Oh, there are so many more dysfunctional and dangerous aspects of the materials economy that The Story of Stuff project wants to expose. We're continuing to work with Free Range Studios to make new films examining different aspects of the problems we face, as well as solutions. In 2011, we're releasing films that look at issues of corporate influence in our democracy and the role of government subsidies in propping up the dirty economy of yesterday. We are calling for measures that ensure a clean and fair economy in the future. To stay in touch with our project, and learn about our new films and educational resources, please sign up at [www.storyofstuff.org](http://www.storyofstuff.org).