

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

Why 2017 Was the Best Year in Human History

Source: Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, January 7, 2018

Note: This is not a news story; this is an editorial (someone's opinion).

We all know that the world is going to hell. Given the rising risk of nuclear war with North Korea, the paralysis in Congress, warfare in Yemen and Syria, atrocities in Myanmar and a president who may be going cuckoo, you might think 2017 was the worst year ever.

But you'd be wrong. In fact, 2017 was probably the very best year in the long history of humanity.

A smaller share of the world's people were hungry, impoverished or illiterate than at any time before. A smaller proportion of children died than ever before. The proportion disfigured by leprosy, blinded by diseases like trachoma or suffering from other ailments also fell.

We need some perspective as we watch the circus in Washington, hands over our mouths in horror. We journalists focus on bad news — we cover planes that crash, not those that take off — but the backdrop of global progress may be the most important development in our lifetime.

Every day, the number of people around the world living in extreme poverty (less than about \$2 a day) goes down by 217,000, according to calculations by Max Roser, an Oxford University economist who runs a website called Our World in Data. Every day, 325,000 more people gain access to electricity. And 300,000 more gain access to clean drinking water.

Readers often assume that because I cover war, poverty and human rights abuses, I must be gloomy, an Eeyore with a pen. But I'm actually upbeat, because I've witnessed transformational change.

As recently as the 1960s, a majority of humans had always been illiterate and lived in extreme poverty. Now fewer than 15 percent are illiterate, and fewer than 10 percent live in extreme poverty. In another 15 years, illiteracy and extreme poverty will be mostly gone. After thousands of generations, they are pretty much disappearing on our watch.

Just since 1990, the lives of more than 100 million children have been saved by vaccinations, diarrhea treatment, breast-feeding promotion and other simple steps.

Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychology professor, explores the gains in a terrific book due out next month, "Enlightenment Now," in which he recounts the progress across a broad array of metrics, from health to wars, the environment to happiness, equal rights to quality of life. "Intellectuals hate progress," he writes, referring to the reluctance to acknowledge gains, and I know it feels uncomfortable to highlight progress at a time of global threats. But this pessimism is counterproductive and simply empowers the forces of backwardness.

President Trump rode this gloom to the White House. The idea "Make America Great Again" professes a nostalgia for a lost Eden. But really? If that was, say, the 1950s, the U.S. also had segregation, polio and bans on interracial marriage, gay sex and birth control. Most of the world lived under dictatorships, two-thirds of parents had a child die before age 5, and it was a time of nuclear standoffs, of pea soup smog, of frequent wars, of stifling limits on women and of the worst famine in history.

What moment in history would you prefer to live in?

F. Scott Fitzgerald said the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time. I suggest these: The world is registering important progress, but it also faces mortal threats. The first belief should empower us to act on the second.

Granted, this column may feel weird to you. Those of us in the columny gig are always bemoaning this or that, and now I'm saying that life is great? That's because most of the time, quite rightly, we focus on things going wrong. But it's also important to step back periodically. Professor Roser notes that there was never a headline saying, "The Industrial Revolution Is Happening," even though that was the most important news of the last 250 years.

I had a visit the other day from Sultana, a young Afghan woman from the Taliban heartland. She had been forced to drop out of elementary school. But her home had internet, so she taught herself English, then algebra and calculus with the help of the Khan Academy, Coursera and EdX websites. Without leaving her house, she moved on to physics and string theory, wrestled with Kant and read The New York Times on the side, and began emailing a distinguished American astrophysicist, Lawrence M. Krauss.

I wrote about Sultana in 2016, and with the help of Professor Krauss and my readers, she is now studying at Arizona State University, taking graduate classes. She's a reminder of the aphorism that talent is universal, but opportunity is not. The meaning of global progress is that such talent increasingly can flourish.

So, sure, the world is a dangerous mess; I worry in particular about the risk of a war with North Korea. But I also believe in stepping back once a year or so to take note of genuine progress — just as, a year ago, I wrote that 2016 had been the best year in the history of the world, and a year from now I hope to offer similar good news about 2018. The most important thing happening right now is not a Trump tweet, but children's lives saved and major gains in health, education and human welfare.

Every other day this year, I promise to tear my hair and weep and scream in outrage at all the things going wrong. But today, let's not miss what's going right.

Possible Response Questions:

- Do you share the writer's optimism about the world? Explain.
- What does the author not say here? What is left out? How would you challenge him?
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.