

Opinions About Banning Plastic Bags

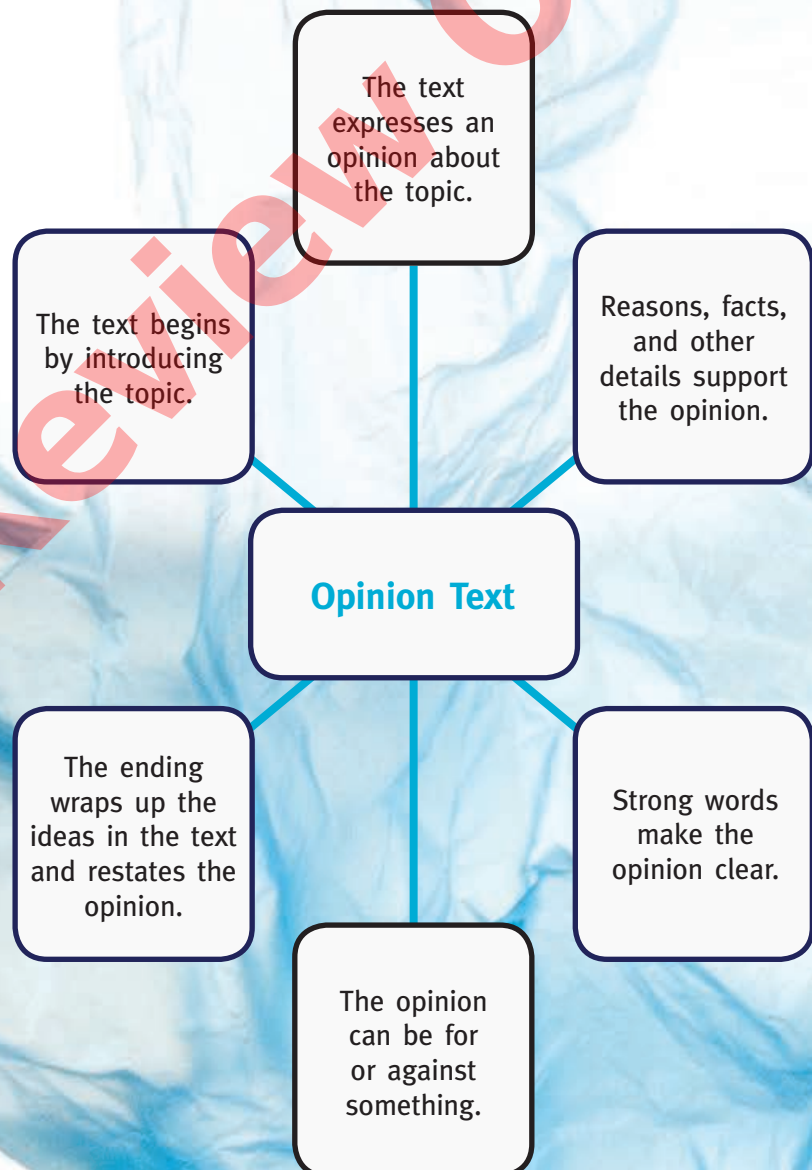
by Joanne Mattern



Plastic bags can be useful and harmful.
Should they be banned?

Opinion Text

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



A large, crumpled brown plastic bag is the background of the slide. A white circular overlay is centered on the bag, containing the title text. The text 'Changing Opinions About' is in black, and 'Plastic Bags' is in large blue letters with a black outline. A large red watermark 'For Research Only' is diagonally across the slide.

Changing Opinions About **Plastic Bags**



People leave a store with the items they buy. Most people carry these things home in a plastic bag. Once a plastic bag has done its job of holding things, however, its journey continues. Some plastic bags get reused or stuffed into the garbage. Too many plastic bags end up in places they should not be. They might float down a river or lie on a street.

Today, people's attitudes toward plastic bags are changing. They don't see plastic bags as just useful anymore. Now they also see them as harmful.

It has become clear that plastic bags **pollute** the **environment**. People are figuring out ways to solve this problem. Some think we should find ways to use fewer plastic bags. Others believe banning plastic bags is the answer. (To ban something is to prevent it from being used or done.) Banning could solve the problem of plastic bags. But not everyone agrees.

This book addresses an important question: Should plastic bags be banned?

Plastic Bags:

Use and Impact

An Everyday Item

Plastic bags date back to the 1960s, when they were created by a Swedish company. Plastic bags started showing up in a few stores in the United States in the early 1980s. By 1985, most stores in the country offered plastic bags.

Stores liked plastic bags because they were cheaper than paper bags. Shoppers liked them too because they were stronger than paper bags and waterproof. People could also reuse them to carry their lunch or line a trash bin at home.



▼ The plastic bags given out at Ralphs grocery store chain in California showed shoppers how useful plastic bags were.



Plastic bags continue to be the main bagging option in stores worldwide. This means a lot of plastic bags get used on a daily basis. The Earth Policy Institute reports that around 1 trillion single-use plastic bags are used worldwide each year. That's about 2 million bags used per minute.

In the United States, each family takes home about 1,500 plastic shopping bags a year, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council. Plastic bags do add up with every shopping trip, but shoppers need something to carry their items in. Shoppers expect stores to have bags.

Over the last thirty years, plastic bags have met that need. They are strong and useful—and available everywhere. Everyone uses a plastic bag at some point. Put simply, people rely on plastic bags.

Single-Use Bags

There are different types of plastic bags. The most common is the “single-use” plastic bag. These bags are carried by grocery stores and smaller stores. Single-use bags are very thin, and are meant to be used once. Usually, the bags are only used for about 12 minutes. However, people do reuse them around the home.



Breakdown Time

Compared to other everyday objects people use, plastic bags take a long time to break down in a landfill.

Object	Amount of Time It Takes to Break Down
newspaper	6 weeks
apple core	2 months
tin can	50 years
plastic bottle	450 years
plastic bag	500 to 1,000 years
glass bottle	1 million years

Source: U.S. National Park Service;
Mote Marine Lab, Sarasota, Florida

landfill



Plastic Bags and the Environment

Worldwatch Institute reports that Americans throw away 100 billion plastic bags every year. These plastic bags often make their way to a **landfill**. There, plastic bags slowly break down into tiny pieces. The plastic pieces harm the soil and water. Also, animals eat the plastic, which can make them sick.

Plastic bags also become **litter**. They easily drift out of trash cans and landfills. Bags wind up in trees, on the side of highways, or in rivers. Cleaning up plastic bags and other litter costs the United States about \$11.5 billion per year, based on a study by the organization Keep America Beautiful.



a plastic bag
stuck in a tree

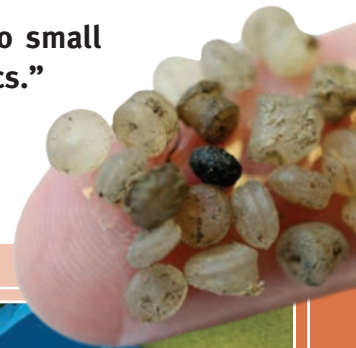


ocean litter

Plastic bags also end up in the ocean. Sea animals eat the plastic bags, which can be dangerous to their health. For example, sea turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish. One study by the Environmental Protection Agency showed that half of dead sea turtles had plastic bags in their stomachs.

Plastic bags break down into tiny pieces in the water, too. These tiny pieces are eaten by sea animals—from small clown fish to great blue whales. Sea animals also get tangled in plastic bags.

Plastic breaks down into small bits called “microplastics.” These are harmful and hard to clean up. ►



The Great Pacific Garbage Patch

In 1997, a boat captain named Charles Moore was the first person to see the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The Garbage Patch is made up of large areas of litter in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (between Japan and California).



Reducing Plastic Bag Use



recycling symbol

Recycling

One way to reduce litter is to recycle. To recycle means to process things so that they can be used again. Like other plastics, plastic bags can be recycled. Plastic bags have a recycling symbol on them. This helps remind shoppers to recycle their plastic bags. Plastic bags can be recycled into new plastic bags, or plastic material to build new things.

Stores also help shoppers recycle their plastic bags. Many stores have recycling bins to make it easy for people.

Shoppers can bring their used plastic bags to the store and put them in the bin. One national study conducted by Moore Recycling showed that about 93 percent of people have a plastic bag drop-off near them. A grocery store chain in the Northeast stated that with the help of customers, they “recycled enough plastic bags to circle Earth seven times!”



Paying for Bags

Another way to help the environment is to reduce, or lower, the number of plastic bags used. One way to do this is to charge customers for each plastic bag. In 2010, Washington, D.C., passed a law requiring stores to charge customers 5 cents per plastic bag. That means a shopper would have to pay an extra 50 cents for ten bags.

The country **ENGLAND** of England has been charging for plastic bags since 2015. Since that time, plastic bag use has been greatly reduced. Some of the money collected from the bag charge has been given to people in need. England expects to use billions fewer plastic bags because of the charge.



Unhappy Customers

Not everyone supports paying for plastic bags. The charge is an extra cost and it bothers people. One customer from Washington, D.C., said, “I was just in this store a week ago and today I’m back, and I had to buy bags. I’m used to the convenience of not having to think about bags, and that has stopped.”

