



THREE CHEERS FOR THE NANNY STATE

Comparing Texts

In this lesson, you will read and compare two selections that present different arguments about the same issue. First, you will complete the first read and close read activities for “Three Cheers for the Nanny State.”



• BAN THE BAN!
• SODA'S A PROBLEM BUT...

About the Author



Sarah Conly holds the title of Associate Professor of Philosophy at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. She is the author of numerous essays, journal articles, and opinion pieces focusing on issues of personal choice and public policy.



Tool Kit

First-Read Guide and Model Annotation

STANDARDS

Reading Informational Text
By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Three Cheers for the Nanny State

Concept Vocabulary

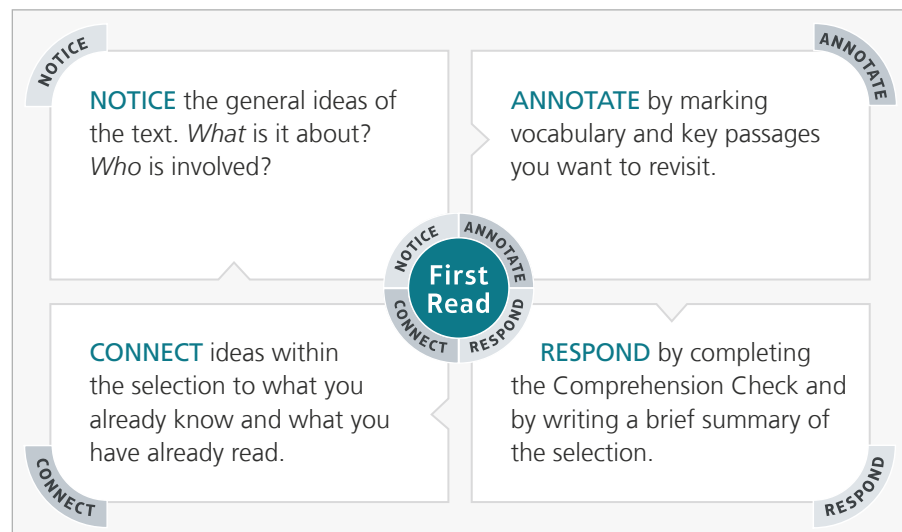
As you conduct your first read of “Three Cheers for the Nanny State,” you will encounter these words. Before you read, rate how familiar you are with each word. Then, rank the words in order from most familiar (1) to least familiar (5).

WORD	YOUR RANKING
impose	
rational	
justifiable	
principle	
status quo	

After completing your first read, come back to the selection vocabulary and review your ratings. Mark changes to your original rankings as needed.

First Read NONFICTION

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete a close read after your first read.



Three Cheers for the Nanny State

Sarah Conly

BACKGROUND

The term “nanny state” is a negative nickname for a welfare state, which is a model of government that takes direct responsibility for the protection and well-being of its citizens. Welfare states offer basic social support, such as free health care or low-income housing, but also create laws and policies that attempt to control or influence how people behave.

SCAN FOR
MULTIMEDIA 

- 1 **W**hy has there been so much fuss about New York City’s attempt to **impose** a soda ban,¹ or more precisely, a ban on large-size “sugary drinks”? After all, people can still get as much soda as they want. This isn’t Prohibition. It’s just that getting it would take slightly more effort. So, why is this such a big deal?
- 2 Obviously, it’s not about soda. It’s because such a ban suggests that sometimes we need to be stopped from doing foolish stuff, and this has become, in contemporary American politics, highly controversial, no matter how trivial the particular issue. (Large cups of soda as symbols of human dignity? Really?)
- 3 Americans, even those who generally support government intervention in our daily lives, have a reflexive response to being told what to do, and it’s not a positive one. It’s this common desire to be left alone that prompted the Mississippi Legislature earlier this month to pass a ban on bans—a law that forbids municipalities to place local restrictions on food or drink.

1. **soda ban** In 2013, New York City passed a law prohibiting soda containers larger than 16 ounces in volume. The New York State Court of Appeals later overturned the law.

NOTES

impose (im POHZ) v. force a law, idea, or belief on someone by using authority

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 1, mark the questions that the author does not answer.

QUESTION: Why might the author have begun the article with several unanswered questions?

CONCLUDE: What effect do these questions have on the reader?

NOTES

rational (RASH uh nuhl) *adj.*
able to make decisions
based on reason rather
than emotion; sensible

justifiable (juhs tuh FY
uh buhl) *adj.* able to be
defended as correct;
reasonable and logical

principle (PRIHN suh puh) *n.*
moral rule or set of ideas
about right or wrong that
influences individuals to
behave in a certain way

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraphs
8–10, mark the types of
bias, or judgments and
prejudices, the author
describes.

QUESTION: Why does
the author include these
explanations of different
biases?

CONCLUDE: How does
this information affect
the persuasiveness of her
argument?

status quo (STAT uhs kwoh)
n. existing state
or condition at a
particular time

- 4 We have a vision of ourselves as free, **rational** beings who are totally capable of making all the decisions we need to in order to create a good life. Give us complete liberty, and, barring natural disasters, we'll end up where we want to be. It's a nice vision, one that makes us feel proud of ourselves. But it's false.
- 5 John Stuart Mill² wrote in 1859 that the only **justifiable** reason for interfering in someone's freedom of action was to prevent harm to others. According to Mill's "harm **principle**," we should almost never stop people from behavior that affects only themselves, because people know best what they themselves want.
- 6 That "almost," though, is important. It's fair to stop us, Mill argued, when we are acting out of ignorance and doing something we'll pretty definitely regret. You can stop someone from crossing a bridge that is broken, he said, because you can be sure no one wants to plummet into the river. Mill just didn't think this would happen very often.
- 7 Mill was wrong about that, though. A lot of times we have a good idea of where we want to go, but a really terrible idea of how to get there. It's well established by now that we often don't think very clearly when it comes to choosing the best means to attain our ends. We make errors. This has been the object of an enormous amount of study over the past few decades, and what has been discovered is that we are all prone to identifiable and predictable miscalculations.
- 8 Research by psychologists and behavioral economists, including the Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman and his research partner Amos Tversky, identified a number of areas in which we fairly dependably fail. They call such a tendency a "cognitive³ bias," and there are many of them—a lot of ways in which our own minds trip us up.
- 9 For example, we suffer from an optimism bias, that is we tend to think that however likely a bad thing is to happen to most people in our situation, it's less likely to happen to us—not for any particular reason, but because we're irrationally optimistic. Because of our "present bias," when we need to take a small, easy step to bring about some future good, we fail to do it, not because we've decided it's a bad idea, but because we procrastinate.
- 10 We also suffer from a **status quo** bias, which makes us value what we've already got over the alternatives, just because we've already got it—which might, of course, make us react badly to

2. **John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873) British philosopher.

3. **cognitive** (KOG nih tihv) *adj.* related to thinking.

new laws, even when they are really an improvement over what we've got. And there are more.

11 The crucial point is that in some situations it's just difficult for us to take in the relevant information and choose accordingly. It's not quite the simple ignorance Mill was talking about, but it turns out that our minds are more complicated than Mill imagined. Like the guy about to step through the hole in the bridge, we need help.

12 Is it always a mistake when someone does something imprudent, when, in this case, a person chooses to chug 32 ounces of soda? No. For some people, that's the right choice. They don't care that much about their health, or they won't drink too many big sodas, or they just really love having a lot of soda at once.

13 But laws have to be sensitive to the needs of the majority. That doesn't mean laws should trample the rights of the minority, but that public benefit is a legitimate concern, even when that may inconvenience some.

14 So do these laws mean that some people will be kept from doing what they really want to do? Probably—and yes, in many ways it hurts to be part of a society governed by laws, given that laws aren't designed for each one of us individually. Some of us can drive safely at 90 miles per hour, but we're bound by the same laws as the people who can't, because individual speeding laws aren't practical. Giving up a little liberty is something we agree to when we agree to live in a democratic society that is governed by laws.

15 The freedom to buy a really large soda, all in one cup, is something we stand to lose here. For most people, given their desire for health, that results in a net gain. For some people, yes, it's an absolute loss. It's just not much of a loss.

16 Of course, what people fear is that this is just the beginning: today it's soda, tomorrow it's the guy standing behind you making you eat your broccoli, floss your teeth, and watch *PBS NewsHour*⁴ every day. What this ignores is that successful paternalistic⁵ laws are done on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis: if it's too painful, it's not a good law. Making these analyses is something the government has the resources to do, just as now it sets automobile construction standards while considering both the need for affordability and the desire for safety.

17 Do we care so much about our health that we want to be forced to go to aerobics every day and give up all meat, sugar and salt?

4. *PBS NewsHour* television news program in the United States.

5. **paternalistic** (puh tuhr nuh LIHS tihk) *adj.* protective, but controlling; in the manner of a parent.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 14, mark the example the author uses to support her claim.

QUESTION: Why might the author have chosen this specific example as support?


CONCLUDE: How does the inclusion of this example affect the author's argument?

No. But in this case, it's some extra soda. Banning a law on the grounds that it might lead to worse laws would mean we could have no laws whatsoever.

- 18 In the old days we used to blame people for acting imprudently, and say that since their bad choices were their own fault, they deserved to suffer the consequences. Now we see that these errors aren't a function of bad character, but of our shared cognitive inheritance. The proper reaction is not blame, but an impulse to help one another.
- 19 That's what the government is supposed to do, help us get where we want to go. It's not always worth it to intervene, but sometimes, where the costs are small and the benefit is large, it is. That's why we have prescriptions for medicine. And that's why, as irritating as it may initially feel, the soda regulation is a good idea. It's hard to give up the idea of ourselves as completely rational. We feel as if we lose some dignity. But that's the way it is, and there's no dignity in clinging to an illusion. 🍷

Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. What new law was proposed in New York City?
2. What is a “cognitive bias”?
3. According to the author, what do people fear they will lose as a result of the new law?
4. According to the author, what will most people gain from the soda ban?
5.  **Notebook** Write a summary of “Three Cheers for the Nanny State.”

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the text?

Research to Explore Write a research question that you might use to find out more about the concept of the “nanny state.”