

Who should act, companies or individuals?

Duration	45 minutes
Students level	Intermediate, Advanced
Materials	Timer, projector
Learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students learn about externalities and how to identify them in different environmental situations. • Students learn to find credible sources and record them clearly. • Students learn to compare company actions (steps businesses take to reduce environmental harm) and individual actions (steps people take in daily life to protect the environment). • Students learn to prepare and deliver a short speech with a clear claim, evidence, and a rebuttal line.
Activities	<p>1. Theory — 10 minutes — frontal</p> <p>The teacher presents the concept of externalities.</p> <p><i>Aim: Introduce the idea of externalities and help students understand the difference between company and individual actions in environmental contexts.</i></p> <p>2. Exercise — 15 minutes — group work</p> <p>Students work in small groups, each assigned either a company action or individual action. Groups are paired off so that for each preselected article, one group focuses on an individual and one on a company action. Using the preselected article and additional sources they can find, they identify examples of how that type of action helps the environment and where it falls short.</p> <p><i>Aim: Guide students to gather short, reliable evidence and organize their arguments by identifying one benefit and one limit for company and individual actions.</i></p>

	<p>3. Exercise — 15 minutes — class</p> <p>Each group selects one or two speakers to present a 60–90 second speech summarizing their side’s case (company or individual action). After each presentation, one student from the opposite side asks a short question or gives a single rebuttal. The teacher moderates, keeping time visible and ensuring respectful tone and equal speaking time.</p> <p><i>Aim: Students practice presenting short, evidence-based arguments and engage in quick exchanges to test the strength of each side.</i></p> <p>4. Reflection — 5 minutes — class</p> <p>Students finish the lesson by summarizing their learning in writing. Each student answers two short questions: “Who should act more on climate change, companies or individuals?” and “Why?” They hand in or share their responses at the end. If time allows, the teacher reads a few examples to highlight the variety of viewpoints and connect the discussion to broader climate responsibility.</p> <p><i>Aim: Help students consolidate what they learned about responsibility, fairness, and impact.</i></p>
Pedagogical tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep time visible and structured so students can manage short research and speaking tasks confidently. • Use clear sentence frames to guide argument building and help all students express ideas. • Focus debate on fairness and effectiveness rather than personal habits to maintain a respectful tone.

Theory

An externality is a cost or benefit that falls on people who are not part of the decision. In climate topics it is usually a negative externality. A factory earns profit from production, but the smoke harms people’s health and the environment that did not agree to the deal. In environmental policy, we compare two sources of externalities. Company action can create large harms or large cuts in emissions through top-down choices about energy, transport, and supply chains. Individual action creates many small harms or savings through daily choices like travel and consumption.



Big companies account for most greenhouse gas emissions because their production, transport, and energy choices have large-scale environmental impact. One policy change, such as switching to renewable energy or improving supply chains, can cut emissions more than millions of individual actions combined. These firms have the financial means and technical knowledge to lead the transition, yet their decisions often depend on profit and consumer demand. When buyers prioritize cheap or high-impact goods, companies have less reason to change, so both sides remain connected in shaping environmental outcomes.

The green transition requires investment in technology, infrastructure, and training. Governments set climate targets and decide how to turn them into taxes, laws, or incentives that make decision makers pay the real cost of pollution. For companies this can mean emission caps, carbon pricing, or investment requirements. For individuals it can mean taxes on polluting products, price incentives for greener options, or public standards that shift daily habits.

But who truly holds the power to spur change? Should companies bear more responsibility because they control large systems, or should individuals lead by changing consumption patterns and influencing demand? Can governments design fair rules that push both sides to act without creating new inequality? These questions highlight the tension between power, responsibility, and fairness at the heart of climate policy.

Exercise

Divide students into groups, ensuring you have an even number of groups. You should assign two groups to each of the topics, one to the company level action and the other to individual level action. Students can find additional articles themselves, as well as identify their own examples of actions, however, you can provide them with the example.

Topic 1: Transition to electric cars

Article:

<https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/decarbonizing-industries/ev-sales-slip-can-auto-industry-navigate-bumps-road-net-zero-2024-06-12/>

Read about the factors slowing the growth of electric vehicles. Identify how companies and individuals affect progress.

- Company action example: A car manufacturer invests in charging networks and develops cheaper EV models.
- Individual action example: A consumer chooses to buy an electric car or use public transport instead of driving a petrol car.

2. Planetary food diet debate

Article:

<https://apnews.com/article/plant-based-diet-climate-04e3edb6b2de628e6238c70ca9f075e9>

Read how diet changes can reduce emissions and improve health. Focus on what companies and individuals can do.



- Company action example: A global food brand replaces beef-based meals with plant-based options and invests in local sourcing.
- Individual action example: A person chooses to eat less red meat and buys food from sustainable producers.

3. Heating homes and energy management

Article: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70ekknr2rwo>

Learn how government, companies, and households each contribute to reducing home heating emissions.

- **Company action example:** An energy company installs district heating systems or offers renewable energy plans.
- **Individual action example:** A homeowner installs insulation or replaces a gas boiler with a heat pump.

4. Plastic pollution

Article:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/24/survey-finds-that-60-firms-are-responsible-for-half-of-worlds-plastic-pollution>

Read how plastic waste continues despite company pledges and recycling efforts. Identify what both producers and consumers can do.

- Company action example: A packaging company designs fully recyclable materials and funds recycling programs.
- Individual action example: A consumer avoids single-use plastics and brings reusable containers when shopping.

After the research stage, each group chooses one or two students to speak for their side, either company action or individual action. Each speaker prepares a 60–90 second speech that includes a clear claim, one example that supports their argument, and one short response to the other side. While one group presents, the other listens carefully and notes one question or counterargument.

Once the presentation ends, a student from the opposite side asks a short question or gives one rebuttal. The teacher moderates the exchange, keeps time visible, and reminds students to use respectful and concise language. When both sides have spoken, the class has a brief discussion on which type of action seems more effective or fair, linking their arguments to real-world examples from the earlier research.

Reflection questions

To conclude the lesson, students take a few minutes to reflect on what they have learned. Each student writes short responses to two questions:

1. Who carries greater responsibility for climate action, companies or individuals?
2. What reasons support your view?



Responses can be written directly on the worksheet or shared digitally. If there is time, the teacher invites a few students to share their answers aloud.

Sources

<https://climatedebate.idebate.net/case-studies/should-companies-or-individuals-bear-the-burden-of-green-transition>

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