

世界学者杯

the World Scholar's Cup

A Celebration of Learning



Guiding Questions

2026 THEME

ARE WE THERE YET?

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Before Exploring the theme

Scholars, [blue texts](#) are hyperlinks which are clickable. They will provide deeper, more detailed information. Simply move your mouse cursor over the [blue texts](#) and **click** it. On mobile devices, just **tap** the [blue texts](#). **Try it out!**



Introductory Questions

- The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, but how does it end?
- Have you ever asked someone, “Are we there yet?” If so, whom were you asking—and where were you going? Did you ever get there?
- Have you ever gotten there, then decided it wasn’t worth it in the end?
- “[And now, the end is near](#),” croons Frank Sinatra. But how do we know when we’re getting to an ending—or to a point of no return?
- In 2003, millions of people gathered at theaters to watch the final *Lord of the Rings* movie. They watched it for a *long time*: three and a half hours. Many complained they kept thinking the movie was about to end, only to have it keep going; by most counts, the movie had [five separate endings](#). Today, if you were streaming it at home, you’d easily be able to check how much longer you had to go. Does it make a difference to your experience of a work to know how close you are to the end of it?
- How about in the real world? Does knowing something in your life—say, the school year, or a friendship—is about to end change how it feels or what it means to you?
- Has an ending ever taken you by surprise? If so, what kind of ending was it?
- When you’re working on a group project, how do you keep track of progress?
- “It’s not the destination, it’s the journey,” is a phrase often misattributed to the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. But is it ever just the destination?
- Sometimes, not getting there—or anywhere—can be beautiful too. Are there places that were neither where you started nor where you were going, but were worthwhile destinations in their own right?

- “**I just can’t wait to be king**,” complains Simba. He is not quite one thing, not quite another. Not everyone is the heir to the throne, but we do all spend time as teenagers, no longer children but not yet adults. Are there advantages to life in the in-between? Would it be better if we transitioned more quickly from childhood to adulthood?
- Are there lessons we can learn from technologies that once seemed about to arrive—**nuclear-powered cars, food pills**, 3D televisions, and many more—but haven’t yet?
- Do you keep a to-do list, or is it something you haven’t gotten around to? How much of your to-do list do you usually end up doing?
- The truth is that sometimes we’ll never get there at all. Most **videogames are left unfinished**; nearly half of those who start university don’t get a degree. What do you think causes people to commit to things that they don’t complete—and are modern technologies making it easier or harder for us to get things done?
- The question of whether we’re there yet is asked in other fields, too, such as business and economics. Is a product ready to be launched? Have we reached the point of diminishing returns? Do these questions ever apply in everyday life as well?
- Here, the answers are probably *yes and we’re getting there*. So—let’s get started.

Progress, Not Regress

- Before 1985, you’d have had no idea how long it would take to install a program on your computer—or to save a file, or to complete an online form. (To be fair, there were no online forms.) Consider the **history of the progress bar**, then discuss with your team: what other activities and interactions in life would benefit from a progress bar?
- Bars are not the only way to pass time. Explore the following alternatives to the standard progress bar, then discuss with your team: what are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
 - indeterminate progress bar | splash screen | console output | skeleton screen | throbber
- Some progress bars continue to inch along even when a process is actually stuck; the idea is to encourage people not to give up. Explore the idea of **placebo buttons**—such as the “close door” buttons on elevators that almost never close the doors, or pedestrian crossing buttons that don’t have any impact on traffic lights—then discuss with your team: when, if ever, is it okay to mislead people so that they feel better about a process?

- Some schemes can be quite elaborate. For instance, **one airport discovered** that, if planes parked further away so that people had to walk longer to baggage claim, they complained less about waiting for their bags once they got there. They were happier moving along than idling at the carousel, even if the total wait time was the same. Can you think of other situations in which people could be tricked into feeling less impatient?
- Designers have discovered that progress bars in apps make users **more likely to complete tasks** such as surveys and applications. Discuss with your team: is it okay to design interfaces that persuade people to complete actions? Is there a point past which nudging becomes manipulation?
- In 1994, the developers of Namco’s Ridge Racer added an Easter egg to their **loading screens**—a version of the studio’s classic *Galaxian* game. Google Chrome does something similar: its **Dinosaur Game** appears when your device goes offline temporarily. In the real world, some restaurants now encourage diners to play games on table-mounted payment terminals (**for a fee**) while waiting for their food. Discuss with your team: should more processes come with these kinds of “auxiliary games” to help people pass the time?
- You can’t know if you’re there yet without some way to measure progress; the same is true for entire societies. Learn about the following socioeconomic indicators with your team: what do they try to measure? Then look up the numbers corresponding to your country and discuss with your team: how accurately do they reflect what it’s like to live there? And how should we decide what the end—or goal—of a society is?
 - Gross Domestic Product | Gross National Income | Gini Coefficient
 - Human Development Index | Multidimensional Poverty Index | Labor Productivity
 - Happiness Index | Passport Index | Big Mac Index
- The Second Law of Thermodynamics suggests that closed systems always grow more disordered over time. Left to themselves, things get messier: your room won’t clean itself. Yet many people take for granted that the world as a whole should become better over time. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” said Martin Luther King, Jr., a quote that may have preceded and certainly outlived him. But it turns out that this idea that the world improves over time may be a **relatively new one**. Discuss with your team: is the world growing better? Be sure to check out the artist Will Crawford’s answer to this question in this **1909 painting**. What would a painting with the same title look like today?

More To Do Than Can Ever Be Listed

- Things to do today include exploring the **history of the to-do list**. You'll find that they were famously used by Benjamin Franklin and Leonardo da Vinci, among other high achievers of history. Below are some more modern approaches to to-do lists to explore—or even try Which format seems best to you?
 - Eisenhower Method | 1-2-3 Method | Ivy Lee Method
 - 4-D Method | Eat that Frog | Must-Do | Bullet Journal
- It's easier to remember things we didn't finish than those we did. That's why a song that got interrupted might nag at you until you hear the end of it, ooh na na—or why you might be unable to keep an overdue assignment out of your head even when you're taking a break. Psychologists term this the **Zeigarnik Effect**. Discuss with your team: how can we use the Zeigarnik Effect to our advantage in tasks like preparing for the World Scholar's Cup? Would we be healthier if we spent more time remembering the things we got done—keeping a "**done list**"—than the things we didn't?
- "The list is the origin of culture," the writer Umberto Eco once said. He held an exhibit of lists at the Louvre (which should have improved security on its own to-do list); he compiled **a book on the topic**, too. Learn about Eco's distinction between practical and poetic lists and consider—what kind of list is a to-do list? Then discuss with your team: are we more drawn to lists than we should be?

The End is Nearish

- In November 2025, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh restored the practice of caretaker governments. In most countries with parliamentary systems, when an election is about to take place, a **caretaker government** runs things until the election is over. Learn more about caretaker governments—who staffs them, what are their main responsibilities, and what are they supposed to avoid doing?—and then discuss with your team: should caretaker governments be used in more countries and for longer periods of time? Have any caretaker governments refused to leave office when their time was up?

- The United States has no caretaker governments (neither does Venezuela), but it does limit its presidents to two four-year terms in office. As their second term begins to run out, they inevitably find themselves losing power and influence. They are said to become “lame ducks” as the country turns its attention to younger, healthier ducks who might win the next election. Discuss with your team: to prevent lame ducks, would it be better to have no limits on how long a person can lead a country or organization? What would you advise someone wanting to hold onto power for as long as possible?
- Queen Elizabeth I’s solution was to delay naming her successor. “I know the inconstancy of the people of England,” she is said to have told the Scottish ambassador, “How they ever dislike the present government and have their eyes fixed upon the person who is next to succeed.” Discuss with your team: would it be better if no one knew who the next leader would be until after the current leader left (or died)? Can you find an example of such a system?
- Someday there may be nobody left to lead. Consider the **Doomsday Clock**, which tries to measure how close we are to the end of human civilization. Discuss with your team: how accurate do you think it is, and in what ways, if any, is it a helpful tool?
- Midnight was coming. The world was on fire and people were dying of a terrible illness. Surely, the end of the world was near—or so thought **Londoners in 1666**. It was **also near** in 1844, 1910, 1988, 2000, and 2012. Doomsday predictions come and go more frequently in the social media age, but people **have been predicting (and rescheduling)** the end of the world for as long as they could **hold up signs** on street corners. With your team, explore the following instances of imminent doom, and consider: what do they have in common? What leads people to believe them—and what makes a doomsday prediction go viral?
 - The Millerites (1844) | Wodsiwob’s visions (1869) | Halley’s Comet Panic (1910)
 - The *Jupiter Effect* (1974) | Hon-Ming Chen (1988) | The Y2K bug (2000)
 - Large Hadron Collider (2008) | Mayan Apocalypse (2012)
- The four horsemen of the apocalypse, fires raging across more than California: the Book of Revelation has long offered artists a **rich source of imagery** for the end of the world. As you explore the following works from the European Renaissance, ask yourself: how does each artist distinguish between the destinations of the saved and the doomed—and is their tone one of terror or acceptance?

- Albrecht Dürer | *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1498)
 - Sandro Botticelli | *The Mystical Nativity* (1500)
 - Michelangelo | *The Last Judgment* (1536–1541)
 - Pieter Bruegel the Elder | *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562)
- Consider the more recent apocalypses depicted below. How have they changed as the world has moved toward industrial and digital anxiety—and what specific fears are these artists inviting us to explore?
 - Thomas Cole | *The Course of Empire: Destruction* (1836)
 - John Martin | *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851–1853)
 - Otto Dix | *World War I prints* (1924)
 - Viktor Schreckengost | *Apocalypse '42* (1942)
 - Harry Louis Freund | *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1946)
 - Saby Menyhei | *The Last of Us: Season 1 Concept Art* (2025)
 - Kevin Sherwood & James McCawley | *“Where Are We Going?”* (2013)
- The end of the world can have a soundtrack, too. Consider the musical selections below. What were the circumstances around each one’s creation, and what techniques do they use to achieve their messages and moods?
 - Olivier Messiaen | *Quartet for the End of Time: “Abyss of the Birds”* (1940)
 - Black Sabbath | *“Electric Funeral”* (1970)
 - REM | *“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”* (1987)
- Chaos, then catastrophe. Researchers have found that one of the signs that an ecosystem is about to collapse is that things become more volatile—for instance, the amount of **chlorophyll in a lake** rapidly spikes and plunges. Global climate change is causing something similar: extreme weather events like hurricanes and droughts have **grown more frequent**. Even flights are **facing more turbulence**. Discuss with your team: what should we do if the climate passes a **point of no return**? Would it be okay to spend fewer resources on fighting climate change if the battle is already lost?
- Some investors are **looking for business opportunities** around the warming of the Earth. Explore some of those opportunities, then discuss with your team: should people be allowed to profit from rising temperatures? Could you imagine a company (or even a government) intentionally contributing to climate change, or other potential disasters, to benefit its own interests?

There's a Draft in Here

- Finished works don't materialize out of thin air. Authors, artists, musicians, architects, animators—nearly all creators go through one or more rough drafts before coming up with a finished product. For the drafts below, consider how much the work changes from one iteration to the next, and research the techniques that artists can use to transfer their sketches onto canvases.
 - Leonardo da Vinci | **Mona Lisa (Louvre)** & **Mona Lisa (Isleworth)** (c. 16th century)
 - Vincent van Gogh | **Bedroom in Arles** (1888), **Bedroom in Arles** (1889), & **Bedroom in Arles** (1889)
 - Edvard Munch | **Despair** (1892) & **The Scream** (1893)
 - Henri Matisse | **Dance (I)** (1909) & **Dance (II)** (1910)
- In songwriting, early drafts are called demos. Sometimes, the songwriter will perform them him or herself, even if the song is intended for someone else to sing. Consider the following demos and then the finished product, then ask yourself: what changed along the way? What makes the finished product feel more “done”?
 - The Beatles | **“Strawberry Fields Forever (Home Demo Sequence)”** (1966)
 - Lin-Manuel Miranda | **“This One's Mine”** (2018)
 - Sophia Anne Caruso | **“Dead Mom (Demo)”** (2019)
 - EJAE | **“Golden” (various demos)** (2025)
- In musical theatre, not all demos end up in the final product—but the Internet has allowed these unproduced numbers to find an audience. Consider the following demos that never quite got there. For each, discuss with your team: why do you think it was left out of the finished product?
 - Aladdin | **“Count on Me”** (1994)
 - Pocahontas | **“First to Dance”** (1995)
 - Book of Mormon | **“Family Home Evening”** (2009)
 - Dear Evan Hansen | **“In the Bedroom Down the Hall”** (2017)
- Most performers rehearse before they go on stage; some people even rehearse before difficult conversations. Investigate the psychology of rehearsal. What parts of the brain does it affect? How do you know when you've rehearsed enough?

We're All in This to Get There

- As returning scholars might remember, some big projects take much too long to finish—high speed rail in California, the Haunted Chocolatier, these outlines. Some never get there at all. Explore the following examples of projects that weren't finished on time, then discuss with your team: What factors, if any, did these delays have in common? How would you have overcome them? And are there projects out there in the world today that you predict will suffer a similar fate?
 - **La Sagrada Familia** | Spain
 - **Nusantara Capital City** | Indonesia
 - Ryugyong Hotel | North Korea
 - Wonderland Amusement Park | China
 - Berlin Brandenburg Airport | Germany
 - Milan Cathedral | Italy
 - **Crazy Horse Memorial** | South Dakota
- The science of project management aims to prevent delays and failures like those above. And, while it's only been formally studied in recent centuries, project management itself isn't a new concept. The makers of the Egyptian pyramids had to deploy a large workforce. China built a notable wall. The Romans devised their roads. Medieval cathedrals reached breathtaking heights. All of these things were complex operations that had to be managed somehow. Consider the **history of project management**, then discuss with your team: are such megaprojects harder to build now than in the past?
- The makers of the pyramids might have benefitted from a **Gantt chart**—an approach invented in the early 20th century which shows a project schedule in the form of a bar chart. Some bars represent tasks that can be worked on at the same time; others need earlier bars to be completed before you can start on them. Explore how Gantt Charts helped in the construction of the Hoover Dam in the United States and how they even became popular in the early Soviet Union, then discuss with your team: what is gained when you translate a project into this kind of format—and what is lost?

- Sleep, study, and a social life: choose two, because you can't have all three. At least, that's what an old student proverb would have us believe. There is a similar "Iron Triangle" in project management: scope, time, and cost. You can do something faster, but it'll cost more or be smaller in scale. You can do something bigger, but it'll take more time or cost more. You can do something more cheaply, but it'll end up slower or smaller. Explore the tools below for navigating these pressures, then discuss with your team: are there times when we might want something to be smaller, slower, or more expensive?
 - Kanban | Gantt Charts | Harmonogram | Dependencies | Risk Register
 - Stakhanovite Movement | Critical Path Method | Program Evaluation and Review Technique
- YouTube began as a dating website; Netflix used to mail people movie rentals on DVDs; Amazon started out selling books and now leads the world in cloud computing. Even the project management software juggernaut Slack began as a chat feature inside a video game. Where many large companies in the 20th century planned every step of their projects in advance, today expectations have shifted away from perfectly sequenced plans to faster pivots between products and even business models. Explore this shift, then discuss with your team: is it better to have a rigid map that might be wrong or no map at all and a very fast pair of shoes?
 - Waterfall method | Command-Control | Toyota Production System | Chaos Engineering
 - Agile Manifesto | Six Sigma | Sashimi Model | The Three Ways
 - "The Phoenix Project" Philosophy
- Even before Gantt charts and the waterfall method, there was Frederick Taylor's ***Principles of Scientific Management***. Taylor thought of workers as gears in a machine; he used stopwatches to measure the "one best way" to get to the end of a task. Explore the related concepts below, then discuss with your team: in our age of algorithmic management and **remote work monitoring**, have we returned to the "stopwatch" era? How would you want to be managed?
 - Taylorism and the Four Principles | Max Weber's Bureaucracy | Ford Assembly Line
 - Total Quality Management (TQM)

- Managers need people to manage—but those people can be frustratingly slow and easily distracted. Explore the psychological and structural “laws” that supposedly govern human effort, then discuss with your team: how do they apply to your preparations for this competition?
 - The Hawthorne Effect | Hofstadter’s Law | the 90-90 Rule | Conway’s Law
 - Putt’s Law | Illich’s Law | Laborit’s Law | Brooks’ Law
- Maybe studying just 20% of this curriculum will get you a high enough score. The **pareto principle** suggests that, in any given process, 80% of outcomes come from 20% of inputs. In a project, it implies 20% of the effort can lead to 80% of the results. Discuss with your team: are most people overworking most of the time?

Where the Sidewalk Starts

- Dubai barely has them; in New York they’re bustling with people and halal food stands. Research the history of the sidewalk—that liminal gap between street and building that serves as a gathering place for some and a bike path for others. Where did they first emerge—and when were the first modern sidewalks built? How different are they from place to place?
- In the once-futuristic world of the Jetsons, the sidewalks don’t just sit there: they whisk people along to their destinations. Something like this still happens at many airports and even some amusement parks. Learn more about **historical efforts** to popularize moving sidewalks. Discuss with your team: why didn’t they catch on more widely? Where would you install them today, if you could?
- Many sidewalks have cars parked alongside them. There are at least a billion parking spots in the United States alone—three times as many as there are people. With your team, investigate the **history of parking**, then discuss with your team: should people have a right to free parking at their homes and places of work?
- People usually park their cars and then dash on to their destination as quickly as they can; they may not give the parking lot itself a second glance. Liminal spaces are easy to overlook on your way to somewhere else. But some parking lots are self-conscious architectural masterpieces. Read about the **Temple Street Parking Garage** in New Haven—and then look into these other lots below. Should more parking lots be built with this much architectural flourish, or should they be as invisible as possible?

- **Lego Parking House** | Billund, Denmark
 - **Parc des Celestins** | Lyon, France
 - **Michigan Theater** | Detroit, Michigan
 - **Garagenatelier Car Park** | Herdern, Switzerland
 - **9th Avenue Parkade** | Calgary, Canada
- Many suburban homes don't hide their parking lots at all—their garages are front-and-center. Consider these so-called “**snout houses**”, then discuss with your team: have you seen any in your community, and would it be better if their garages were more hidden?
 - Modern architect Frank Lloyd Wright would certainly have hidden them: he imagined cars **living inside of houses**. For him, there was no need for wasted liminal space between homes and streets. Explore the design and history of his famous **Robie House**, then discuss with your team: does it truly “blur the boundaries between interior space and the world of nature”? How different would your school look if it had followed the same principles?
 - Observe how Los Angeles has transformed one set of downtown parking lots into a **new community gathering place**, then discuss with your team: are there places in your own city that should be converted in a similar way?

Monkey See, Monkey Prototype

- Products can have rough drafts too. To see how well they work and what people think of them, companies often create early samples—or prototypes—of potential products. Here are **some examples** of prototypes that turned into popular gadgets and gizmos (aplenty); sometimes, as in the case of **the iPhone**, they may look nothing like the product that ultimately made it to market. Learn more about the **prototyping cycle** by researching the the terms below, then discuss with your team: are there other things in life that would benefit from prototyping? Is there any difference between a prototype and a draft?
 - sketches | storyboarding | paper prototypes | low vs. high fidelity
 - wireframing | mockup | proof of concept | user testing
 - minimum viable product | minimum marketable feature

- Instead of hiring engineers to work with a factory in Shenzhen (or Baja California) to create a product sample, today an inventor can try out a new concept with simulated models and 3D printed mockups. Even your school might have a “makerspace” that you can use to channel your inner Thomas Edison—or **Sarah Boone**. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of such **rapid prototyping**, then discuss with your team: should access to these tools be limited to those who can use them responsibly?
- In the world of software, AI-powered vibe coding allows users to create programs without writing a line of code. Just ask a chatbot for what you want and watch it appear. You might want to try **vibe-coding** yourself, then discuss with your team: should we be worried about a future flooded with too many programs of **uncertain quality** and with limited support? Is it better if not everyone can get “there” so easily?
- In 1770, a Hungarian engineer announced a startling invention: a machine capable of playing chess. This “Mechanical Turk” toured the world, impressing everyone from Benjamin Franklin to Edgar Allan Poe. There was just one problem: it was **not an early example of AI**, but a hoax, operated by a chess master hidden within. Companies today may still take a similar approach—known as **“Wizard of Oz” testing**—to test user response before production. Discuss with your team: is it okay to mislead users during product testing in order to make the finished versions of those products better?
- Elon Musk once unveiled a prototype humanoid robot that turned out to be a **dancer in a costume**. His more recent demonstrations are closer—but **still not quite there**. Read about **some other examples** of companies faking demonstrations of their not-quite-ready products, then discuss with your team: should companies be required to tell people when demos are slightly or entirely rigged?
- Some companies have even sold products and services that still secretly relied on people to function properly. Amazon’s AI-powered cashiers at their “Just Walk Out” grocery stores were actually overseen by **thousands of low-paid workers**; Fireflies.ai makes millions a year selling automated notetaking at meetings, but recently revealed that at first their powerful AI was just the **founders listening in** and writing stuff down. Look for similar cases, then discuss with your team: should companies be punished for releasing successful products and services that once relied on human intervention but no longer do? Is “fake it ‘til you make it” justified as long as you make it in the end?

The Lovely and the Liminal

- You're there now—but why? If you've ever forgotten why you walked into a room, you may have experienced what scientists call the **doorway effect**. This temporary amnesia happens when you pass through the threshold of a liminal space; scientists theorize that the brain may “reset” short-term memories when it finds itself in a new setting. Liminality is that state of being in-between: you aren't where you were but you're also not where you're going. As you explore this concept, discuss with your team: what are other examples of liminal spaces and thresholds in our own lives?
- Most films take you from one spot to another, through the lens of the camera, as stuff happens in front of you. But some “found footage” has become famous for losing the viewer in the in-between. Watch one of the most popular of these efforts, *The Backrooms* (2022), then discuss with your team: did it make you feel uneasy? Have you ever had a moment when you felt adrift in this way—and, if so, where?
- *The Backrooms* helped inspire **this video game**. Consider it and other games that take players into eerie landscapes, abandoned buildings, and foggy nowheres—such as Galactic Cafe's *The Stanley Parable* (2013). What aspects of liminal spaces make them effective settings for these games?
- The philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that beauty is something that affects us as if it had a purpose even when it doesn't. Beauty doesn't need to be going anywhere. Does Kant's thinking help us understand why people might be attracted to liminal spaces?
- We also pass through shared liminal spaces in the real world: train stations (and trains!), airports, elevators. Consider the following works, then discuss with your team: in what sense does each of them depict a liminal setting?
 - J.M.W. Turner | *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844)
 - William Powell Firth | *The Railway Station* (1862)
 - Tsukioka Yoshitoshi | *Picture of the Railroad at Takanawa* (1871)
 - Claude Monet | *Gare Saint-Lazare* (1877)
 - Yilan Folk Song | “Drip, Drip, Drip” (c. 1924)
 - Steve McCurry | *Train Station, Agra, 1983* (1983)
 - Richard Artschwager | *Six in Four* (2015)
- If you've ever gone to the doctor, the odds are good you've sat in a room waiting for someone to call your name. With your team, explore the **architecture of waiting**. How

can a waiting room **decrease anxiety** (or amplify it)? How would you design waiting rooms differently for different purposes?

- In recent years, the popular meaning of the word “liminal” has expanded to include more of the not-quite-right and not-quite-there. Consider the following pieces and then discuss with your team: is it fair to describe them as liminal works? Or are we using the term liminal too loosely?
 - Paul Gauguin | ***Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*** (1897–98)
 - Rene Magritte | ***The Treachery of Images*** (1929)
 - Salvador Dali | ***The Persistence of Memory*** (1931)
 - Andrew Wyeth | ***Christina’s World*** (1948)
 - M. C. Escher | ***Ascending and Descending*** (1960)
 - Gregory Crewdson | ***Beneath the Roses*** (2004)
 - Camille Seaman | ***The Distant is Imminent*** (2020)
- To be in-between is to pass through a space where the normal rules of movement, time, and social interaction are suspended—but only briefly, on the way to elsewhere. But what happens if you’re stuck in such a place? As you explore the selections below, consider: how should we approach spending time in liminal spaces? Should we do more to seek them out?
 - Samuel Beckett | *Waiting for Godot*, **Scene 2** (1953)
 - Pablo Neruda | **“Keeping Still”** (1958)
 - Philippe Orreindy | ***I’ll Wait for the Next One...*** (2002)
 - Marcel Ayme | **“The Man Who Could Walk through Walls”** (1941)
 - Amor Towles | *A Gentleman in Moscow* (**Excerpt**) (2019)
- Some people put on a little music when they’re talking with someone else, or when they’re eating dinner—just to fill the room with a certain kind of background sound. Ambient music is designed to do exactly that, without needing you to focus on it—and it’s a newer genre than you might think. Consider the examples below, beginning with composer Brian Eno’s effort to make airports less stressful, and then discuss with your team: should we be playing more ambient music and fewer pop songs, podcasts, and YouTube videos when the goal is just to keep away the quiet? Or is ambient music best reserved for liminal spaces—is it, in fact, music for airports?
 - Brian Eno | ***Ambient 1: Music for Airports*** (1979)
 - Hiroshi Yoshimura | ***Music for Nine Postcards*** (1982)
 - Max Richter | ***Sleep*** (2015)

Going Pains

- In 2001, millennial pop star Britney Spears sang that she was “not a girl, not yet a woman”. In other words, she was an adolescent. Actually, she was 20 at the time—no longer a teenager, but well below the age at which our **frontal lobes stop developing**. With your team, explore the **history of teenagers** and the related terms below. If adolescence has always been a developmental stage in both humans and **many other animals**, why is the **idea of teenagers so new**?
 - prefrontal cortex | neural pruning | risk-taking | neophilia | differentiation
- The word “adolescent” comes from a Latin word meaning “to grow toward”. But “teenager” relies on a quirk of the English language—that the numbers 11 and 12 have their own unique words, while 13 through 19 are compound words that combine a single-digit number and a suffix meaning “ten” (four-teen, six-teen, and so on). How do other languages refer to adolescents and teenagers—and does your own first language differentiate between these two terms? What are their different connotations? Do cultures with languages that use a -ten suffix for the numbers 11 and 12 define the “teenage” years differently? For instance, in Spanish, the -ten suffix only comes into play at 16—*diez* (10) y *seis* (6); do children only become teenagers at 16 in Spanish-speaking countries?
- Many cultures hold special ceremonies to celebrate the passage from the dependency of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood. With your team, explore the following rites of passage and consider: what is the difference between a cultural rite, such as a quinceañera, and a secular one, like graduating from high school?
 - sweet sixteens | fiesta de quinceañera | vision quests
 - seijin no hi | bar and bat mitzvahs | walkabout | khatam al quran
 - debuts | high school graduation | driver’s license | first paycheck
 - national service | voting | moving out
- A ceremony offers a definite moment: now you are a man, or woman, or more broadly an adult. But the transition to adulthood is rarely a single, clean step; more often, it is a series of stumbles. The following works explore the messy middle years, where childhood collides with the expectations of tradition, society, and self-identity. As you explore them, consider: is adulthood a destination you reach or a mask you learn to wear?

- Gwendolyn Brooks | **“We Real Cool”** (1963)
 - Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve | **“The Medicine Bag”** (1975)
 - Carol Ann Duffy | **“In Mrs. Tilscher’s Class”** (1990)
 - Joss Whedon | **“Where Do We Go From Here?”** (2001)
 - Karen Russell | **“Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”** (2006)
 - Ruth B | **“Lost Boy”** (2015)
 - Major Jackson | **“Let Me Begin Again”** (2021)
- Millennials—people born between about 1981 and 1995—gave us side parts, skinny jeans, and **“adulthood”**. This term transformed adulthood into a verb, something you do (often with great effort) rather than something you simply are. Whether going to bed early, scheduling a dentist appointment, or buying a vacuum cleaner, describing your actions as “adulthood” implies you are just role-playing as a grown-up. Consider with your team: is being an adult a specific feeling or just a collection of habits and responsibilities? When do you think you will feel like an adult?
 - Life is a journey—but does it end with a final port of call or a temporary layover? Explore the following works and discuss with your team: how do they handle the idea of life approaching its last liminal moment?
 - Rumi | **“A stone I died”** (c. 13th century)
 - John Donne | **“Death Be not Proud”** (1633)
 - Alfred Lord Tennyson | **“Ulysses”** (1842)
 - Emily Dickinson | **“Because I could not stop for Death”** (1890)
 - Rabindranath Tagore | **“Gitanjali 95”** (1913)
 - Dmitri Shostakovich | *15th Symphony*: **Fourth Movement** (1972)
 - Thich Nhat Hanh | **“Please Call Me by My True Names”** (1976)
 - David Berman | **“A Letter from Isaac Asimov to his Wife Janet, Written on His Deathbed”** (1999)
 - Linkin Park | **“In the End”** (2000)

Home and Wandering

- In the fifteenth century, Europeans launched their caravels and galleons on what would become a merciless colonial crusade around the globe. They relied on a Chinese invention, **the compass**, which transformed the ocean from a terrifying void into a measurable grid. Learn about other key innovations that helped these smallpox-toting explorers navigate the seas, then discuss with your team: what would the world be like today if Europeans had simply stayed home?
 - astrolabe | sextant | log tables and ephemerides | magnetic compass
 - the log and line | chronometer | latitude and longitude
- We have Google Maps, or Baidu, but how do other animals know when they've arrived? From the monarch butterfly's multigenerational migration to the globe-trotting of the humpback whale, animals follow astoundingly complex routes around the Earth. Learn more about their migration patterns and processes through the terms and examples below, then consider: are animals truly navigating, or just following their instincts? And is human activity making it harder for them to find their way?
 - magnetoreception | cryptochromes | olfactory navigation | echolocation | zugunruhe
 - constant frequency | frequency modulation | sunlight polarization | spatial memory
 - **indigo bunting** | **dung beetle** | **honeybees** | **homing pigeons** | **sea turtles** | **desert ants**
- “We know where we are,” **sang Moana's ancestors**—and they knew it without maps, compasses, or access to Starlink. Instead, Polynesians drew on **a complex system** of non-instrument navigation, including the star compass, ocean swells, and animal sightings. In the Arctic, the Inuit use **the night sky and other markers** to find their way—even in a landscape almost uniformly white with ice and snow. With your team, explore traditional navigation methods (including some that **may be legendary**) and consider: how does the journey change if the map is not on our screen but in our mind? Would the world be better off if more people knew how to navigate it without their phones?

- In some video games, such as *Zelda* and *Yakuza*, the unexplored regions of the map are cloudy until you visit them. The real world used to be more like that: Columbus sailed into the unknown (and never reached his intended “there”) and you couldn’t know what was around the riverbend until you went around the riverbend. Some mapping apps now offer the chance to recreate that experience by masking regions of the map until you set foot in them. Check out one example, **Fog of World**, which promises us the chance to “experience a richer life”, then discuss with your team: can limiting easy access to knowledge really enrich our experience of the world? If so, what else should we keep “foggy”?
- In the 2004 film *The Terminal*, a traveler lands at an American airport only to discover that his country’s government has collapsed. With his passport no longer valid, he can’t enter the United States, but he also can’t go home again—so he ends up living at the airport indefinitely. Watch **highlights from the film** with your team, then consider the real case of **Mehran Karimi Nasser** that inspired it. Why do you think Steven Spielberg made the changes to the story that he did? And what should governments do in situations like these? You may also want to look into some **more recent examples** of people stuck in airports, including that of **Edward Snowden**.
- Immigrants by land and sea can also face obstacles to entry when they reach their destinations. Consider **the case of the St. Louis**, a ship carrying Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in 1939. The passengers were denied entry in the United States, Canada, and Cuba, and many ultimately died in Nazi concentration camps. More recently, the United States has stopped allowing people to ask for asylum at its southern border; **European countries** are also increasingly reluctant to accept refugees. Explore the reasons behind these anti-immigrant policies; do some make more sense than others? Then, discuss with your team: how open should countries be to those arriving at their borders in dire need? Should there be limits on the number admitted, and, if so, how should those limits be calculated?
- Consider the following poems that speak to the immigrant experience. Are they expressing something universal, or are they too constrained by the specific experience of migrating to the United States? In what ways do they relate to the idea of thresholds and liminal spaces?

- Emma Lazarus | **“The New Colossus”** (1883)
 - Adrienne Rich | **“Prospective Immigrants Please Note”** (1963)
 - Marilyn Chin | **“We Are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra”** (1987)
 - Adrian Castro | **“The Sound of One Immigrant Clapping”** (2005)
 - Richard Blanco | **“Mother Country”** (2019)
- Some artists, too, explore the liminality of the migrant. Whether between home and the unfamiliar, or legal and “alien” status, how does each of them treat the state of being in-between?
 - Frida Kahlo | ***The Bus*** (1929)
 - Jacob Lawrence | ***Migration*** (1941)
 - Led Zeppelin | **“Immigrant Song”** (1970)
 - Fiddler on the Roof | **“Far From the Home I Love”** (1971)
 - Genesis | **“Illegal Alien”** (1983)
 - Brendan Graham | **“Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears”** (1995)
 - Kofi Konowiecki | ***Borderlands*** (2016)
 - Los Tigres del Norte | **“Somos Mas Americanos”** (2013)

Where We’re Going, We’ll Still Need Them

- “All roads lead to Rome,” insisted one medieval European proverb. (In other parts of the world, roads led elsewhere.) While Roman roads may be the most famous for their **longevity and scale**, they were far from the first road network. Explore the history of roads and the related terms below. Then, consider some of the most famous roads in the world **both today** and in **ancient times**.
 - macadam | pavement | asphalt | corduroy road | gallery road
 - holloway | ridgeway | milestones | trackway
- Modern engineering is moving towards roads that do more than just sit on the ground—they participate actively in transport. As you explore the innovations below, consider: what problems are they trying to solve, and what new ethical or environmental problems might they create? Ultimately, is the future of the road paved at all, or does something more radical await over the horizon?

- solar roadways | piezoelectric materials | inductive charging
 - DSRC | self-healing asphalt | modular pavement | permeable pavement
- Urban designers know the frustration of watching unofficial trails sprout on perfectly manicured lawns. These are **desire paths**: the physical evidence of the shortest distance between two points. But, while a straight line is efficient, it isn't always optimal. The "best" route is a shifting balance of speed, energy, and the unknown. With your team, consider the logic of the shortcut and the science of the scenic route. How do humans, animals, and even slime molds decide what way to go? Should we always follow the path of least resistance?
 - Traveling salesman problem | vector-based navigation | explore-exploit problem
 - Route elasticity | "Braess's Paradox | dead reckoning | the Steiner Tree Problem
 - If the chicken **crossed the stroad**, it would probably get run over. Explore what makes stroads different from—and, according to critics, more dangerous than—traditional streets and roads, then discuss with your team: are there any in your community, and are there times when they might be the best choice?
 - "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door," says Bilbo to his nephew in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and he doesn't even have stroads to worry about. Stepping over your threshold means signing a contract with the unknown, even if you have a destination in mind. In the works below, the road is not just a strip of dirt or asphalt: it is a psychological landscape. As you read them, consider: what is the difference between traveling by choice and by necessity? And is it ever better to just stay home?
 - Du Fu | **"Travelling Again"** (761 CE)
 - William Shakespeare | **"Sonnet 50"** (1609)
 - John Massfield | **"Sea Fever"** (1902)
 - Carl Sandburg | **"Window"** (1914)
 - Robert Frost | **"The Road Not Taken"** (1915)
 - William Butler Yeats | **"Sailing to Byzantium"** (1927)
 - Rustu Onur | **"The Journey"** (c. early 20th century)
 - Czeslaw Milosz | **"This Only"** (1988)
 - Richard Russo | **"Just Drive"** (1992)
 - Rita Dove | **"Vacation"** (1994)

- While the first long-distance car journey took place **in Germany**, it was in America that the concept of the road trip took hold. Read more about **its history** then discuss with your team: why is the idea of the road trip so associated with America even when other places also have expansive road systems? Is it because the country lacks trains and buses?
- Be sure to look into other long distance overland journeys, including the once-legendary **London to Calcutta bus service** and the still operational **Transoceánica from Brazil to Peru**. Can they be called road trips even if they don't take place in cars? Or is it only a road trip if you can choose when and where to stop along the way?
- The Federal Highway Administration of the United States calls it “the Mother Road”: others refer to it as the Main Street of America. Though no longer a major thoroughfare, Route 66 is still widely revered and remembered. Read about its history, or check out **this video**, then consider: what is the most famous road in your own country? Why do you think Route 66 still tugs at the imagination of travelers today?
- People on road trips needed a place to sleep at night. Early on, many simply pulled off the road and camped beside their cars; over time, a new kind of car-friendly hotel emerged to serve them. Read about the **world's first motel** and the **history of motels since**, then consider: are there equivalents in your country—and have you ever stayed at one?
- Consider the art and music selections below: what aspects of being on the road do they reflect? Do they over-idealize the experience of traveling by car—or critique it unfairly?
 - Nat Cole | **“Get Your Kicks on Route 66”** (1946)
 - Edward Hopper | **Western Motel** (1957)
 - Edward Ruscha | **Standard Station** (1966)
 - Willie Nelson | **“On the Road Again Song”** (1980)
 - David Hockney | **Pearblossom Highway** (1985)
 - Tom Cochrane | **“Life is a Highway”** (1991)
 - Bic Runga | **“Drive”** (1996)
 - Norah Jones | **“Come Away with Me”** (2002)

- “Beware thoughts that come in the night,” writes Willian Least-Heat Moon, in the introduction to his 1982 road trip travelogue masterpiece, *Blue Highways*. Read the book’s **first page here**, then discuss with your team: do you agree with him that traveling in a circle has more purpose than traveling in a straight line? If you were given a car, unlimited gas (or endless EV charging), and all the time in the world, where would you want to drive it?

Call of Duty-Free

- People on the road have historically needed places to park themselves too. With your team, explore the **history of inns and hotels**, including what might be the **oldest hotel in the world**. What differentiates a hotel from earlier forms of accommodation, such as post houses?
- The rise of hotels coincided with the rise of tourism—travel for leisure, instead of for migration or business. Historians trace the roots of modern tourism to the **grand tours** of the 17th and 18th centuries, in which young aristocrats would travel across Europe as a rite of passage. Review a typical **grand tourist itinerary**, then discuss with your team: in what sense does this tradition continue today?
- The grand tour was a privilege afforded mainly to the nobility and the wealthy. It took the emergence of the railway, the ocean liner, and the passenger jet, along with the rise of a middle class with enough disposable income, to bring **tourism to the masses**. Explore the history of leisure travel, then discuss with your team: why do certain places attract more tourists? Is it possible to attract too many?
- Some people (and **American politicians**) long for the so-called “Golden Age of Travel”: an era of opulent ocean liners, spacious flying boats, and wealthy travelers dressed to impress. They contrast this glowing picture with the cramped seats on modern airplanes and images of barefooted passengers clipping their nails at 30,000 feet. Whether or not such a golden era ever existed—**historians have their doubts**—discuss with your team: what, if anything, should be done to improve the travel experience today? Be sure to consider the **psychology behind tourist misbehavior**: is there something about traveling that encourages people to act in ways they wouldn’t at home?

- Although nothing beats a Jet2 Holiday, tourists are increasingly avoiding tours that shuffle everyone through the same overcrowded museums and restaurants in favor of more “authentic” travel experiences. Explore the following niche forms of travel and consider what role **social media** may have had in promoting them. How realistic is it to engage in deep exchange and learning while on holiday?
 - heritage tourism | ecotourism | gastrotourism | agritourism | monastic retreats
 - voluntourism | edutourism | wellness retreats | dark tourism
- People aren’t the only things that travel, of course; goods do too. Before the era of long-distance shipping, a trader who didn’t want to confront the full length of a trade road might transport his goods to or from an *entrepôt*. These bustling market towns were not destinations but waystations where goods were imported, stored, and traded again without being subject to local duties. Learn more about the terms and places below as you explore the history of getting goods from here to there to an Amazon Prime truck.
 - entrepôts | waystations | free-trade zones | transshipment | caravanserai
 - Silk Road | Piraeus | Tyrus | Lothal | Carthage
 - Shimoda & Hakodate | Malacca | Istanbul | Chicago | Hong Kong

Next Year in Futurism

- “Science has not yet mastered prophecy,” Neil Armstrong (the first man on the moon) once said. “We predict too much for the next year and yet far too little for the next ten.” Indeed, some technologies exist in a tantalizing but perpetual “almost there”, always just a few years away. Consider the examples below, then discuss with your team: why are these technologies stuck in the near future, and which one would you be most excited to see in action?
 - fusion power | cure for cancer | graphene | flying cars | virtual reality
 - nanotechnology | space elevator | food pills | artificial general intelligence
- With apologies to Mr. Armstrong, sometimes people also predict too much for the next ten. Consider **these predictions** for the year 2028, made in 2018. Are there any that haven’t come true yet but that you think still might in the next two years?

- “It will soon be possible to transmit wireless messages all over the world so simply that any individual can own and operate his own apparatus,” the inventor Nikola Tesla told the New York Times in 1904. Whether it was an accurate prediction of the smartphone depends on what you think the meaning of “soon” is. For Tesla, soon meant, “I’m building it right now; I just need more funding.” Read more about his [Wardenclyffe Tower](#) and the reasons it failed, then discuss with your team: what if it had succeeded?
- Tesla is far from the only person to have declared that “it will soon be possible...” Sentences that begin with this and similar phrases (e.g., “In a few years, everyone will...”) almost always make ambitious predictions about the near future. Search online for examples like them, then discuss with your team: for each one, are we there yet, and how long did it take us to get there? If not, how close are we? Here are three examples to get you started.
 - “...for one man to be heard by every human being on Earth” (1925)
 - “...to launch a satellite that makes its own solar array in orbit” (2019)
 - “...for humans to live a thousand years or more” (2025)
- People have invested billions of dollars in developing different approaches to extend their lives indefinitely. Learn more about those listed below, then discuss with your team: if science does find ways for us to live much longer lives, would there be any reason to hesitate before using them?
 - organoids | bioprinting | plasma transfusion | senotherapeutics
 - cellular reprogramming | cellular rejuvenation | telomere extension
 - caloric restriction | digital immortality | cryonics
- Read about some of the futuristic technologies [predicted in the past](#), then [watch this video](#) that shows how those predictions evolved across the 20th century. Some of them seem fantastical—an Olympics on the moon in the year 2020?—but others may already be within our reach, or just slightly beyond (where they may or may not get stuck). With your team, consider: what can we learn about the past from where people thought we were going? Are any of the things that people predicted about the 21st century things you might now predict for the 22nd?

- Who wouldn't want quantum supremacy? In 2019, Google made a splashy headline: they'd **achieved it!** Others soon claimed they had too. But researchers admit quantum computers still have **no practical purpose**, even as cryptographers worry that they could someday be used to hack even the most encrypted passwords. Read more about this **much-dreaded Q-Day**, then discuss with your team: should we be developing technologies that have unclear practical advantages but clear downsides?
- Certainly, here are some examples of text generated by large language models. It's not just the use of em dashes, but the use of negative parallel structures like this. **Wikipedia has compiled a list** of signs that a piece of text has been generated by AI. We may soon get to a point where we won't be able to accurately distinguish human- and AI-generated content—at least, not without setting **deliberate traps**. Will it matter?
- Deep learning-driven neural networks excel at competing high school English assignments, but it's not clear that they're getting anywhere close to **artificial general intelligence (AGI)**—that is, to an AI that mirrors the ability of humans to learn, understand, and apply knowledge across unlimited contexts. Discuss with your team: should we want to get there? How will our lives change if and when we do?
- “Because it's there,” the British explorer George Mallory once responded, when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest. (It's not clear if he ever got there.) During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union looked the opposite direction and **launched rival projects** to drill as deep as possible into the Earth's crust. The United States made it about 600 meters; the Soviet Union, about *12,000*—resulting in the **Kola Superdeep Borehole**. The project only shut down in 1992 after the Soviet Union itself went into a hole. Learn more about this project and others like it, then discuss with your team: what, if anything, should be the next frontier humanity tries to reach—and why? And are races—and heated rivalries—the best way to get somewhere quickly?

Concluding Questions

- When is it a good idea to give up? Be sure to learn about **the sunk cost fallacy**. Does it imply that we should quit on things more often? How about on people?
- Is it always better to know how long it'll take you to get somewhere? If not, what are examples of times when it would be better not to know?
- What if it takes us forever to get there? Consider the “dichotomy paradox” posed by the Greek philosopher Zeno. He observed that to walk across a thing—for instance, Greenland (which belongs to Denmark)—first you need to walk across half of it. Then you need to walk across half of what's left, then half of what's left after that, and so forth. Since there is always another half to go, you'll never reach the other end. How would you solve this and his other **paradoxes of motion**?
- “Are we there yet?” is a question **linked with impatience**. Explore the psychology of patience: what makes some people willing to calmly wait a little longer? Is patience more valued in some cultures than in others? And does patience have downsides?
- World War I was “the War to End All Wars”; 1989 was, per Francis Fukuyama, “**The End of History**”. The first meant achieving global peace; the second trumpeted the triumph of liberal democracy. The world isn't there yet, in either case, but is it getting closer? Should one or both of these be our goals in the first place?
- *I choose to believe*. Endings aren't always clear. In the final episode of Stargate Universe, a starship flies off into the vast emptiness between galaxies, its fate never to be resolved; **cancellation** left its crew's future ambiguous. Other works of fiction have ended with more deliberate uncertainty. The Sopranos infamously **cut to black**; the **last chapter** of Life of Pi lets us decide whether the main character really made friends with a tiger; Deckard may or may not be a replicant. How important is it that stories end definitively? Can you think of any that should have ended a little earlier—or **skipped their epilogues**?
- This ending is clear: we're there. Where do we go next?



Are We There Yet?

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