

High School Essay Contest 2025

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First Place – Caro Garden Club
First Place – Michigan Garden Clubs
First Place – National Garden Clubs

Dear Recycling: I Hate To Break It To You

Dear Recycling,

You have had much success throughout your career. In 2018 you saved over 193 million metric tons of carbon dioxide ("Recycling Basics and Benefits"). You have the amazing ability to turn ten plastic bottles into enough energy for a laptop to work for 25 hours ("Recycling Basics and Benefits"). You also have managed to create as many as 681,000 jobs, \$37.8 billion in wages, and \$5.5 billion in tax revenues for a single year ("Recycling Basics and Benefits"). Your ambition has gotten you far, which is why I find it necessary to be honest about the reality of the plastic disposal crisis we face today. Because it is in all of our best interest to find the best solution to our plastic disposal problems, I want to pitch an idea that I know you will not like: prioritizing Reduction and Reuse over yourself [Recycling].

To start by stating the obvious, the less plastic we use, the less we will experience the negative effects that come with plastic waste. Now Recycling, I know what you're thinking: if we could just figure out a way for you to handle plastic, then Reduction wouldn't be necessary.

However, part of the problem with the plastic crisis is that not all plastic can be recycled in a safe way. For example, chemical recycling can release up to 96 types of cancer-linked toxins in the air including benzene, mercury, arsenic, formaldehyde, and more ("Recycling plastic by turning it into toxic smoke?"). Additionally, it's not just the air we have to be concerned about, but also the possibility of creating microplastics in the water and any sort of hazardous emission. There are ways to recycle safely, however, roughly 25% of plastic produced (thermosets) are nearly impossible to recycle because of their cross-link structure ("Plastics - Is Recycling the Answer?"). With 380 million tons of plastic getting used each year ("Plastic Pollution Facts: [Plasticsoceans.org/the-facts](https://plasticsoceans.org/the-facts)"), a quarter of that, or 95 million tons of plastic, is accumulating every year and we have no idea what to do with it. Additionally, sorting out the thermoset plastics leads to increased costs and decreased efficiency for recycling companies ("Plastics - Is Recycling the Answer?"). Recycling, it is important for you to know that there is plenty for you to

continue to tackle, but there are also parts of the plastic disposal problem that you cannot fix. We must depend on more than just you [Recycling] in order to tackle this problem.

Recycling, not only is it important for you to get help from Reduction, I also find it necessary for you to get to know Reuse a little better. Reuse looks like a store requiring customers to pay for their own grocery bags, which could help encourage customers to invest in a reusable bag since they would be saving money in the long run and helping the environment. 500 million plastic bags are used worldwide with over one million being used every minute ("Plastic Pollution Facts: [Plasticsoceans.org/the-facts](https://plasticsoceans.org/the-facts)"). These practices may sound too simple to help, but when you look at the numbers, you can see how much plastic waste could be reduced with just a little bit of help from Reuse. The reason I emphasize Reuse is because it is completely unnecessary to go through so many single use plastic items. Reuse could easily take much of the pressure off your [Recycling's] back.

Finally, Recycling, I want you to know that I have always supported you in your efforts to reduce waste, and protect the precious ecosystems we take for granted. I support your vision. I too want to live in a world where our wildlife is safe, our air, water, and land is clean. However, Recycling, it is not possible for you to take on our plastic disposal problem on your own. I believe it is absolutely vital for you to come together with Reduction and Reuse in order to achieve your goals. So please Recycling, consider how much could be achieved by letting Reduction and Reuse step in.

Sincerely,
Alexa G.

Word count 666

Citations

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