

Essay Topic: Merchandising Doubt

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway end their preface of *Merchants of Doubt* with this passage:

This is the story we are about to tell. It is the story about a group of scientists who fought the scientific evidence and spread confusion on many of the most important issues of our time. It is a story about a pattern that continues today. A story about fighting facts, and merchandising doubt. (9)

For this essay, I want you to imagine an audience who asks you about this book (perhaps it is a real audience). You tell them about the terrible things that the tobacco industry did to undercut the scientific research and consensus that tobacco causes cancer and addiction. Your audience nods and agrees. They have heard of the deceptive actions of the tobacco industry.

But when you tell them that this same pattern of deception and resistance to scientific evidence and actions based upon this evidence extends to other issues—particularly environmental issues—this audience shakes their head. “No way,” they say. You tell them that, in fact, it has even been some of the same people from some of the same groups who have used these same “doubt merchandising” strategies in issue after issue. “You’re crazy,” they say.

Then you reply, “Let me explain and establish that this pattern is real.”

Your purpose is to demonstrate to this audience that the pattern of “fighting facts, and merchandising doubt” is a pattern that is real.

The essay task then is to **explain** what the pattern of merchandising doubt is by using Chapter 1 “Doubt Is Our Product” on the issue of tobacco as a paradigm for this pattern. Sometimes the authors refer to this pattern as the “Tobacco Strategy.” Then, you are to establish the reality of this pattern by **establishing** how this same “tobacco strategy” was used on another issue discussed in the text.

Essay Requirements:

This essay should be in essay form, use textual evidence from the book alone (no research yet), and be 1000-1250 words in length. It should also be in MLA Manuscript Format and Documentation Style. There is no need for research; base your entire paper upon information from the book *Merchants of Doubt*.

Essay Explanation:

One way to think of this essay assignment is to see it as a matching or connecting task. The chapter on tobacco details multiple tactics and strategies the tobacco industry used to doubt the science and fight regulation and law suits. As a class, we will work together to outline the list of these strategies (or what the author’s call the “pattern”).

Then **you will pick ONE other issue** talked about in the book, and on your own, you will outline and list the strategies described in the chapter on that issue. (Issues include: nuclear winter (chpt. 2), acid rain (chpt

3), the ozone hole (chpt. 4), second hand smoke (chpt. 5), global warming (chpt. 6), Rachel Carson (chpt. 7).

In your essay, you will explain and establish the reality of this pattern by matching or connecting these two issues. For example, Tactic #1 used by the tobacco industry is the same as Tactic #3 used in the controversy over the ozone hole. You are establishing that this pattern exists by demonstrating its presence in another issue.

Structure for the Essay

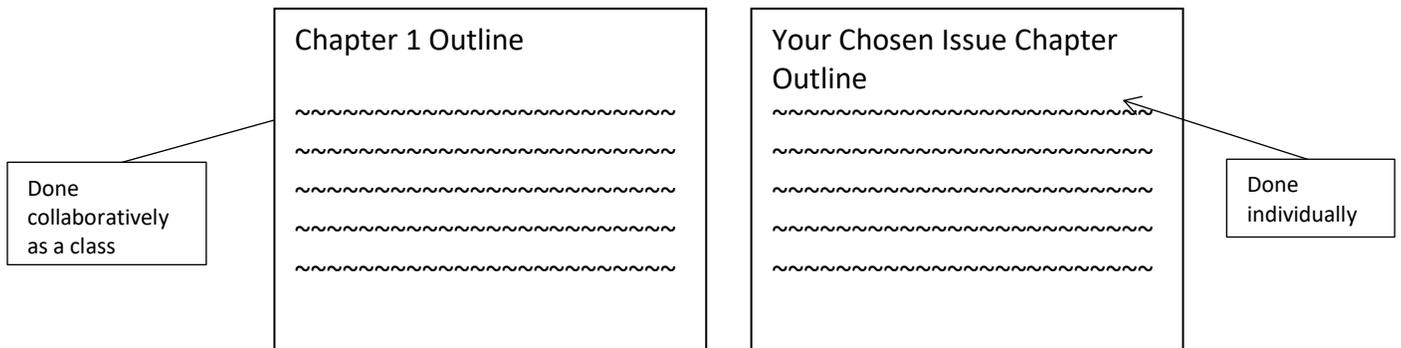
You will need an introduction, body, and conclusion. In the body of the paper, you should structure your paper around common tactics or characteristics of the pattern that exists in both issues:

- I. Introduction
- II. Common Tactic/Characteristic #1
- III. Common Tactic/Characteristic #2
- IV. Common Tactic/Characteristic #3
- V. Common Tactic/Characteristic #4
- VI. Conclusion

(Students wanting to be considered for an “A” will explore four tactics.)

Outlining the Chapter on Your Chosen Issue, Listing Connections

A preliminary task for writing the essay will be reading your chapter (and re-reading it) carefully. You should read the chapter closely, and critically (annotating and taking notes). Then, you will create a chapter outline which identifies the tactics and characteristics of the merchandising doubt pattern. You will turn this chapter outline in as an assignment, along with a list of connections between your issue and the chapter on tobacco.



Added Essay Note:
Tactics, strategies and characteristics of the “Tobacco strategy” may evolve or be different as manifested in another issue. You should make careful note of these evolutions or differences in your essay.

List of Tactics and Connections	
Chapter 1	Your Chapter
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~~~~~	~~~~~
~~~~~	~~~~~
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You will build your Body paragraphs around these common connections of tactics and characteristics between chapters.

Added Essay Note:
Be clear about your Essay Question as a way of focusing your thesis.
Essay Question:
Is there really a strategy of merchandising doubt to fight scientific evidence on modern issues?



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