CLIMATE ACTION TOOLKIT FOR WRITERS

TLC The Literary Consultancy

Welcome to The Climate Action Toolkit for writers, a free resource commissioned by The Literary Consultancy (TLC) for writers who care about the planet.

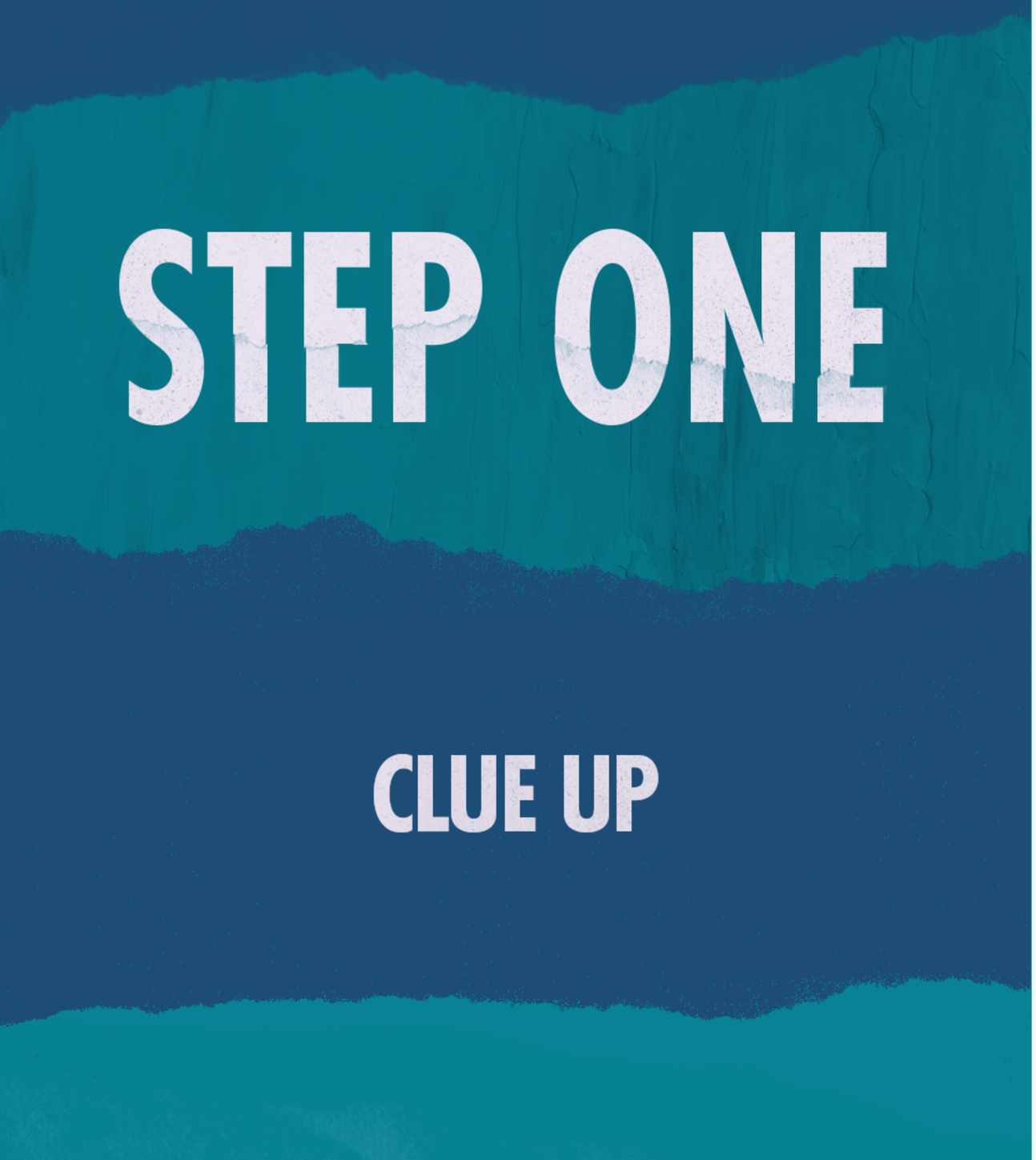
This is a beginner's guide for writers who want to learn more about the current climate crisis. It's for writers who want to:

- Learn how climate intersects with literary practice and the publishing industry
- Find out what practical steps you can take to make a positive impact.

We have also collected some ongoing reading and resources which you may find helpful. Please enjoy the guide and share it widely. You can tag us on social media using the hashtag **#ClimateActionforWriters** or by finding our social handles!

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Learn about the publishing industry

The global publishing industry has serious environmental and political complexities. When publishers are incentivised to prioritise shareholders over a quality, diverse, flourishing bibliosystem, we often see worsening conditions for authors, readers, and the planet. Indeed, if profit is prioritised above everything else, as with most industries, we see a decline in care for workers, supply chains, readers, discouragement of experimentation and production of extraordinary amounts of waste.

Traditional publishing prints large quantities in anticipation of sales, knowing that vast numbers will remain unsold. Estimates suggest around **320 million books** are sent to landfill in the US each year without ever reaching a reader's hands. Print publishing **depends** on intensive raw material extraction, energy-heavy printing, global distribution networks, and waste disposal. While digital reading reduces paper use, e-readers and devices rely on minerals such as lithium, copper, and palladium, the mining of which has deep social and environmental costs.

What might a healthier publishing industry look like? One that remains within the planetary boundaries?

From promotional waste to inefficient warehousing systems, books are surrounded by a constellation of disposable products such

as plastic dust jackets, promotional knick-knacks, and inefficient packaging. More sustainable processes are emerging - paper made from hemp or sugarcane, eliminating dust jackets, reducing print runs, and designing distribution systems around care rather than excess. How can writers support a more sustainable approach to book manufacturing and marketing?

ACTION: Check out **Publishing Declares**, a sustainability pledge and initiative launched by the UK-based Publishers Association to drive urgent climate action within the book and journal industry, bringing together publishers, printers, and suppliers to meet net-zero targets by 2050 at the latest. This baseline commitment of the wider publishing industry outlines who is active and committed, and where you might apply pressure or find allies. From here, you can start to identify how to leverage your position to make change within your ecosystem.

Learn about culture washing

Culture washing is the practice of corporations using sponsorship of the arts to improve their public image. Essentially, large corporations co-opt the positive public perception of culture to manufacture consent to continue their extractive and exploitative activities.

In recent years, corporate behemoth Baillie Gifford has sponsored many of the UK's major literary festivals, including Hay, Borders, Cheltenham, and Edinburgh, creating a near-monopoly on cultural funding. This sponsorship made large parts of the literary sector structurally dependent on fossil fuel money.

As of 2022, Baillie Gifford had up to £5 billion invested in fossil fuel companies, including holdings in the China National Offshore Oil Company - linked to the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, which threatens communities and ecosystems in Uganda and Tanzania. The firm also invests over £10 billion in companies complicit in Israel's occupation of Palestine and violations of international law, including £61 million in Babcock International, a UK defence company involved in arming Israel. These investments mean that cultural sponsorship directly subsidises environmental destruction and military violence. This is not a singling-out: there are many more examples of companies with similar investment structures. The argument could be made that no corporate-level sponsorship can be completely 'clean'. In the UK, registered charities often have Ethical Fundraising Policies that analyse with various checks in place. There is no reason that our industry couldn't borrow from this protocol.

In response to this particular sponsorship, the **Fossil Free Books** (FFB) campaign successfully pressured festivals to drop Baillie Gifford. In 2024, nine festivals severed ties, despite organisers describing the loss of funding as devastating due to its long-term, unrestricted nature. This is a very real consequence and should not be ignored in this conversation,

but what the campaign demonstrated is that collective action can materially disrupt harmful funding structures. It stands to reason that the same collective action could also be put to use solving some of the funding issues exposed when a major funder is lost. It is clear that more thought needs to be put into how the literary ecology can be more financially sustainable.

> **ACTION:** Be curious and use your research skills - who is sponsoring the event you are attending? How might your attendance be being co-opted to legitimise unsavoury actors? Are there groups or collectives you can join with fellow writers and readers to ensure strength in numbers if making challenges to these sponsorships?

Educate yourself on the messy debates

Cli-fi author Wren James, founder of **Climate Fiction Writers League**, urges writers to dive into the contentious climate debates of our time: geoengineering, degrowth, environmental justice, raw mineral extraction, carbon credits. James suggest writers approach these not as policy questions but genuine human dilemmas and a question of values.

Who stands to win and who stands to lose from geoengineering? If we cover the world in solar panels, whose life will be impacted from the level of rare mineral extraction needed to fuel this? When you explore these complexities through character, you can create nuanced, humanised interpretations that resonate with how readers actually experience the world - which the Scientists who are writing these academic papers are crying out for.

> **ACTION**: Do the reading and form your own positions. What convinces you? What leaves you uncertain? What solutions seem viable, and who's championing them? How might a character morally opposed to smart phones think about climate differently than another organising demonstrations through social media?

Educate yourself on the root causes

Every genre has space for climate writing, it is not just a task for sci-fi writers. The climate crisis is cultural, emotional, political, not just ecological. We live under a system built on overextraction, where we have enough resources for everyone to live with dignity, yet billions remain below the poverty line, and competition is prioritised over connection and community. The **Climate Fiction Prize** is one example of a literary initiative championing literary engagement with the environment across genres. The **Wainwright Prize** has been celebrating nature, conservation and environmental writing for years. In poetry, the **Gingkgo Prize** focuses on ecopoetry.

Capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism are all dominant logics that isolate us, rewire our brains to overconsume, and structure the supply chains of everything we buy. These logics and how they are resisted form the architecture of everyday life - they are the water we swim in, and yet so difficult to comprehend. Whether you acknowledge it or not, these dominant logics shape your writing. The question for writers is: how will you engage with them thoughtfully?

STEP TWO

EXPERIMENT

You don't need to identify as a 'climate writer' to weave climate themes into your work. The root causes of climate change, the divisive debates, the dominant logics we live and breathe, resist and are defined by, are rich territory for interrogation through character, plot, style, and structure. Not every story needs to be climate fiction, but we can acknowledge that we're all already writing within and about these systems, we are just choosing whether to engage with them consciously.

Play, think, feel

Build out time to explore and play with how you can write climate as subtext and interrogate your own beliefs. **The Climate Conscious Writers Handbook**, developed by Wren James and the Climate Fiction Writers League, offers a playful approach: an interactive journal packed with exercises to demystify climate writing and prompts for embedding climate themes organically into any story.

For fiction writers

> **ACTION:** Explore systems through your characters.
>
> Your characters exist within systems that shape their desires, their perceived options, their sense of what's possible. Consider how they navigate these contradictions? What happens when someone

prioritises connection in a system that rewards consumption? When inherited wealth comes from fossil fuel extraction?

These logics shape choices, relationships, breaking points and create compelling tension because they reflect real dilemmas readers face every day.

ACTION: Create worlds beyond classic disaster narratives. **Doom narratives** alone do not activate people. In the UK, people feel climate change is something distant from them. Work must be done to expose how climate change and the systems that create it are woven into our everyday lived reality - climate themes live in the everyday contradictions your characters face and don't require apocalyptic settings to be explored.

What does a thriller look like when the conspiracy involves carbon offset fraud? How does a historical novel reframe the Industrial Revolution through the lens of extraction rather than progress? What happens when a die-hard activist cuts off everyone for not complying with their strict world view?

How can the tensions, complexities, overwhelm we all experience when contemplating climate change be woven into the texture of your written world? Could it be in the job your character can't quit, the price of the coffee going up due to impacted supply chains, or the neighbourhood being gentrified by green development? Could it be in an inheritance from money accrued in unsavory ways? Small acts of resistance that accumulate? Climate writing is material, and human, like when a character chooses to bike in the rain, not from virtue but because the bus routes were cut and they can't afford the higher fares.

For non-ficiton writers

ACTION: Interrogate the normal and inevitable. Climate justice invites you to question how history has been told, what we've been taught to see as natural or inevitable, or successful. How have dominant narratives shaped our understanding of progress, development, and ambition?

When you write about economics, ask: who benefits from stories of endless growth? When you write about culture, ask: how have consumption and individualism been normalised? When you write a memoir, ask: what systems shaped the choices available to you and your family?

ACTION: Follow the threads. Where did your grandmother's pension come from? What industries built your hometown? Whatgets extracted from your region, and who profits? Non-fiction can make visible the connections that have been deliberately obscured.

STEP THREE

DIRECT ACTION AND ORGANISING

ACTION: Join a group and organise collectively

If you want to learn, be useful and be inspired, find your allies: other writers or members of your community organising for change either where you work or live. People you already know, with shared concerns and shared dreams. Climate education is embodied, lived as well as read, and members of your community will bring you up to speed much faster and more intuitively.

There are many groups which offer different avenues for action for writers specifically:

- **Fossil Free Books** organise as workers for a book industry free from fossil fuels and fossil fuel finance or the **Society of Authors** who organise as a trade union for better industry standards.
- **The Society of Authors Sustainability Committee** a member-led initiative established in 2021 to promote environmentally sustainable practices in the publishing industry.
- **Writers Rebel** is a collcective of writers, poets, and authors associated with Extinction Rebellion UK, using the power of words to protest the climate and ecological emergency, aiming to spark transformation through literature, hosting events, publishing, and organising to demand action for a safer future.
- **Climate Fiction Writers League** is a network of global fiction authors organising for climate action.

Consider how your skills as a writer might be useful to campaigns and action in your local area. And, consider what your specific interests are. Where and how might you make a difference? Wherever you are, every movement needs communicators!

ACTION: Understand writing as labour

Fossil Free Books defines itself as 'a collective of book workers - authors, publishers, illustrators, and more' organising for a fossil-free, genocide-free books industry through collective action, including labour withdrawal and boycotts. A core insight of FFB is the framing of writers as workers, not isolated creatives, understanding we are all more powerful when we act collectively.

ACTION: Learn when to withdraw your labour, time, body, money

Writing is a form of labour which produces enormous value, it can be withheld and redirected in ways that build new forms of leverage and solidarity. When writers understand themselves as part of a system where their participation and labour is essential for the wider profit generation of an industry, it underlines the immense power of withdrawing their labour and participation from things they don't agree with. Following the action of your union and campaign group, you can understand how to tactically withdraw your labour, attendance, money and participation in support of wider goals.

ACTION: Redirect your labour

Climate Change Writers is a global network of passionate writers dedicated to amplifying the voices of those affected by climate change, communicating the urgency of the crisis and inspiring action towards resilient futures. They foster a network of over 4000 writers from over 140 countries to volunteer their time and skills towards broader campaign and climate goals. Joining as a volunteer writer allows you to donate your time to environmental organisations and research institutes, translate key articles into engaging formats, collaborate with scientists to create engaging climate content.

STEP FOUR

BUILD A BETTER LANDSCAPE FOR WRITERS AND THE PLANET

Understand alternative horizons for publishing

Small-scale publishing models are experimenting with sustainable, deliberate alternatives to the globalised publishing industry: these include worker-owned cooperatives where staff collectively govern operations and share profits; author cooperatives that give writers control over production and distribution; and scholar-led presses operating on "scaling small" principles - producing only what their community can sustainably support rather than chasing growth.

Print-on-demand technology has made small-scale operations (in some cases) more economically viable by eliminating the need for warehouses, large print runs, and the financial risks of traditional publishing. Community-supported models where readers subscribe or become members to fund operations create direct relationships between publishers and audiences, bypassing corporate distributors. Understand the new horizons for publishing rooted in cooperative approaches and support the infrastructure even when you're not publishing with them. Subscribe to community-supported presses, join as a member, or participate in crowdfunding campaigns. This creates the financial stability these models need to survive.

Adovcate upwards and outwards

In the theatre industry, theatre companies will use Green Riders to influence venues towards sustainable practices - a document detailing the things you need from a host organisation to ensure that you can deliver your work in the most environmentally-friendly way possible. Similarly, writers can equip themselves with basic questions and requests of their potential publishers to encourage dialogue and action around materials, energy use, emissions targets and investments which build on campaign pressure points and demands from other areas of the industry.

The Society of Authors Sustainability Committee have created this practical tool: **Tree to Me: 10 Questions you can Ask your Publisher** which you can use to support these conversations and help you know what to ask for. It draws on existing frameworks and movements for action to guide collaborative action between writer and prospective publisher, and can help you know what green flags to look out for.

Climate Fiction Writers League has also compiled **this handy list** of Literary Agents looking for climate fiction writing.

Writing helps us understand the world and each other. Now, that understanding must become transformation, and we need writers of all kinds to take up that work.

Further Resources

- Network of likeminded authors:
  https://climate-fiction.org/our-members/
- Climate Literary Agent Database:
  https://climate-fiction.org/literary-agent-database/
- The Climate Conscious Writers Handbook:
  https://climate-fiction.org/the-climate-conscious-writers-handbook/
- Climate Fiction Writers League:
  https://climate-fiction.org/
- Climate Change Writers:
  https://www.climatechangewriters.com/
- Network of Climate-Conscious Authors:
  https://climate-fiction.org/our-members/
- Towards a Green New Deal in Publishing (Lit Hub):
  https://lithub.com/the-radical-bookseller-toward-a-green-new-deal-in-publishing/

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