

Malthus and the Theory of Population

Reading worksheet / October 6, 2026

01 HL ch. 4, pp. 65–78

Name: _____

What this is. A scaffolded worksheet to accompany today's reading. Fill in blanks and short answers as we go. Keep these pages — they are your study record for the quiz at the end of class. Page numbers refer to Hunt & Lautzenheiser, 3rd ed.

A1 Life and works

HL pp. 65, 71–72

Thomas Robert Malthus lived from _____ to _____. He held the first British professorship of _____ at the East India Company's college at _____.

His two major works:

- **1798:** _____ — his *first Essay*, written against Condorcet and Godwin. Revised substantially in 1803 (“in reality, a new book”).
- **1820:** _____ — his second major work, defending the landlords in the Corn Law struggle and introducing his theory of gluts.

A2 The debate with Condorcet

HL p. 72

Condorcet (1743–1794) was a French mathematician and philosopher of the Enlightenment who argued that human history was moving toward a natural order of _____ and reason. He proposed two government reforms:

(a) _____

(b) _____

Malthus's response, in one sentence:

A3 The debate with Godwin

HL pp. 72–73

Godwin (1756–1836) argued that the defects of the working class come from _____, not from innate depravity. His remedy was the abolition of _____ (and of law and government), achieved voluntarily through human reason.

Malthus's response, in one sentence:

A4 The Corn Laws

HL pp. 70–71

What were they?

Where did Malthus
stand?

Why?

Keep in view. Malthus's first Essay (1798) answers Enlightenment reformers; his later *Principles* (1820) defends landlords in the Corn Law fight. One writer, two moments.

The population argument

Mechanism, checks, and moral restraint

02 HL pp. 74–76

B1 Name the theory and its home passage

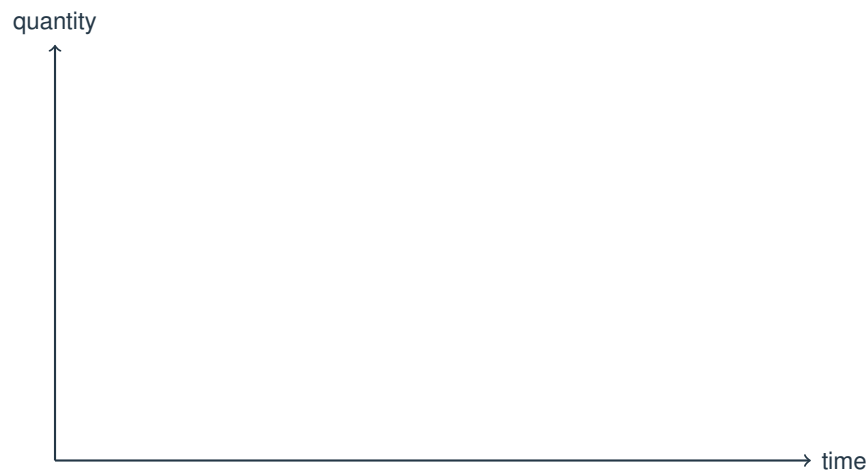
HL p. 74

Malthus's overpopulation argument is laid out in his _____ (1798). The theory's engine is a contrast between two kinds of growth.

B2 The two ratios — draw the picture

HL pp. 74–75

On the axes below, draw two curves: (1) **population growth**, labeled geometric or exponential (“doubles itself every twenty-five years,” p. 74), and (2) **food supply growth**, labeled arithmetic or linear. Mark the point where they intersect.



What happens where the curves cross?

B3 Positive vs. preventive checks

HL p. 75

Fill in the table below.

Type of check	Mechanism	Examples
Positive	_____	
Preventive	_____	

B4 Moral restraint, vice, and misery

HL p. 75

Malthus writes that *all* checks “are all resolvable into _____, _____, and _____” (p. 75).

He defines **moral restraint** as:

“the restraint from _____ which is not followed by _____.” (p. 75)

B5 Why this matters

HL p. 74

Why does Malthus think the pressure of population on food is a matter of *natural law* rather than *policy*?
One sentence.

Keep in view. The two ratios set up the trap. The checks are nature's response. Moral restraint is the only *virtuous* way out, and (per Malthus) few will take it.

The poor, the body, the ladder

Malthus's moral economy — and ours

03 HL pp. 75–78

C1 Views on the poor — circle T or F

HL pp. 74–77

According to Malthus's position in the Essay, circle TRUE or FALSE.

Claim	T / F
(a) Poverty is caused primarily by unjust social institutions.	(p. 74)
(b) The English Poor Laws help the poor by raising their standard of living.	(p. 76)
(c) “Carelessness and want of frugality. . . predominates among the poor.”	(p. 76)
(d) Raising wages from 18 pence to 5 shillings a day would permanently improve workers' lives.	(p. 76)
(e) The wealthy proprietors are society's most valuable class.	(p. 77)
(f) The “ladder” of inequality is what has lifted civilization above the savage state.	(p. 77)

C2 Sexual behavior and the poor

HL p. 76

In three or four sentences, explain how Malthus connects (a) birth control / “promiscuous intercourse,” (b) the dignity of women, and (c) the behavior of the poor. Where is the virtuous path, in Malthus's view?

C3 The notorious “encourage mortality” passage

HL pp. 77–78

Malthus writes:

“To act consistently therefore, we should facilitate, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavouring to impede, the operation of nature in producing this mortality. . . make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague.” (pp. 77–78)

What is Malthus arguing, and what does it reveal about where his theory logically leads?

C4 Reflection — choose ONE

Think forward from the reading

Pick one and write five or six sentences on the back of this sheet.

- (a) **Famine.** Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in part for showing that modern famines are usually caused not by absolute food shortage but by failures of *entitlement* — people cannot afford or access the food

that already exists. In what way does this challenge Malthus's framework? What would Malthus have to concede?

- (b) **Welfare today.** Modern debates about work-requirements, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and universal basic income still echo Malthus's "18 pence to 5 shillings" argument — that income support reduces the incentive to work. State Malthus's case in modern language, and then make the strongest counter-case you can.
- (c) **Climate and growth.** The "limits to growth" tradition — Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), the Club of Rome's 1972 report, today's degrowth debates — is structurally Malthusian: exponential consumption against finite resources. In what way is the argument similar, and where might it depart from Malthus?

Keep in view. Keep in view for next class: Malthus takes the *exchange* vantage point, not the production one. H&L argue this is why he lands on *harmony* where Smith at times saw *conflict*. We pick that up next.