



Finding E Words in The G Word with Adam Conover: New Opportunities to Teach Economics

As the French economist Frederic Bastiat famously pointed out in his essay “What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen,” the consequences of government intervention are often not immediately apparent. Similarly, the Netflix series *The G-Word* with Adam Conover highlights the importance of understanding both the seen and unseen consequences of government action. Although there are only six episodes in total, the series provides numerous teaching opportunities for foundational concepts related to the impact federal government has on various aspects of American life, including the unintended consequences of government intervention. This paper summarizes six teaching opportunities and identifies dozens of additional concepts covered in the series.

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1. Introduction

President Ronald Reagan famously quipped that “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.”¹ There has been a general negative trend in the public’s trust in the federal government since the 1950s, and that level of trust has been near historic lows for the past decade.² *The G Word with Adam Conover* investigates different agencies within the federal government that have a profound impact on our daily lives to showcase ways that the US government imposes costs and benefits on the general population. The series was constructed as an informational comedy series like Adam Conover’s previous network television series, *Adam Ruins Everything*.

While each episode could broadly serve as an application of “government intervention,” there are several key scenes throughout the series that highlight fundamental economics concepts that are often taught in principles-level courses. This paper identifies each of those key scenes in the appendix and highlights a scene from each episode that covers a key topic in the introductory economics curriculum. These teaching opportunities are described in more detail below and all scenes are available to stream on the Economics Media Library (<https://econmedialibrary.com>) for educators who would like to review the other scenes. Some scenes in the series contain adult language that may not be suitable for every classroom. Each scene mentioned below is short enough to review in its entirety before being shown in class.

2. Literature Review

A large body of literature exists on the broad applications of popular media to teach economics concepts (Wooten et al. 2021). This body often combs through entire series and storylines to identify several concepts covered in principles-level courses. These projects often resulted in websites that host scenes from popular television series ranging from *Seinfeld* (Ghent et al., 2011) to *Breaking Bad* (Muchiri et al., 2022). The focus of each of these projects was to identify multiple brief scenes that conveyed key concepts in a few minutes. The use of popular media extends beyond television shows and includes other popular culture including Broadway musicals (Rousu, 2016), ESPN documentaries (Al-Bahrani & Patel, 2015), and comic books (O’Roark, 2017).

In other instances, popular media has been used to narrowly teach particular concepts. Under this framework, the economic concept is the focus of the research and popular media is used to demonstrate that specific concept. Wooten and White (2018) show how *Moneyball* can be used to teach marginal revenue product and Murphy et al. (2020) demonstrate how a particular episode of *Have Gun–Will Travel* can be used to teach the Coase Theorem. Some previous literature goes a bit farther and focuses on how media can be used to teach entire units, rather than singular concepts, like game theory (Geerling et al., 2021), market structures (Kuester & Mateer, 2018), or behavioral economics (Briguglio et al., 2020).

The earliest streams of literature focused on identifying concepts whereas more recent streams demonstrate the ways that media can be implemented in the classroom. The most recent publications provide teaching guides, discussion questions, assessments, or writing assignments that educators can use immediately. This resource joins a broader literature that has highlighted various assessment methods for using media in the classroom (Geerling, 2012; Levey, 2015; Picault, 2019; Wooten, 2020).

¹<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/news-conference-1/>

²<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>

3. Show Summary

The G Word with Adam Conover is a documentary comedy series produced by Netflix in 2022. The series was produced by Barack and Michele Obama and is loosely based on Michael Lewis's (2018) book *The Fifth Risk*. The series has a total of six episodes that discuss topics related to the role of the federal government and is structured similarly to Conover's previous educational comedy show *Adam Ruins Everything*, which also contained some scenes that could be used to teach economic concepts (Wooten & Tierney, 2019).

Each episode highlights important roles the government plays in daily life that most Americans would not have thought involved the government. Examples include USDA inspections at meatpacking plants, scientists developing weather forecasts at the National Weather Service, and the military's maintenance of GPS satellites. The series also uncovers some of the questionable ways the federal government has intervened in daily life. These questionable interventions often result in unintended consequences or rentseeking behavior by private companies.

4. Teaching Opportunities

There are several direct and indirect references to economic concepts in each of the six episodes. Appendix A includes a breakdown of topics found in each episode with links to the scenes hosted on the Economics Media Library (Wooten, 2018). Appendix B includes a list of major topics taught in a principles course with references back to the scene listed in Appendix A. The series is structured such that students don't need to have seen previous episodes to understand the dialogue occurring in any particular episode. Given that setup, educators may be able to select one or two clips to use in their lectures without needing to show all 28 clips.

The following teaching guides highlight one scene from each episode that contains a direct reference to key economic concepts. Each scene includes a summary, a link to the scene, relevant concepts and a multiple-choice question that could be used as part of an assessment activity. The suggested answer has been bolded in each question. The scenes often contain applications of particular concepts which make them appropriate to show after teaching the particular concept as a formative assessment. Given the structure of each clip presented below, the questions would likely work well in large classrooms that use a classroom response system or in smaller classrooms that use group discussion. The assessment structure is limited only to the question and answer such that an instructor could insert this question into their curriculum as they see fit.

Episode 1: Food

Scene: A Job for Everyone

Length: 47 seconds

Summary:

People have a wide array of preferences for working conditions, which creates a heterogeneous workforce. Some workers may need to be paid extra to compensate for unpleasant conditions (known as a compensating differential) while others may accept less to work a job they enjoy. Workers are often assumed to be utility maximizers, not income maximizers, in the decision of which jobs to work and how many hours to work. Adam highlights this concept at the end of this brief scene with a USDA veterinarian who specializes in diseases.

Relevant Concepts:

Compensating differentials, income, labor economics, preferences, utility maximization

Assessment Question:

Why don't all veterinarians necessarily take the highest-paying job available to them?

- A. All veterinarians fear the additional responsibility that is associated with higher-paying positions.
- B. Income plays no role in a veterinarian's overall happiness level.
- C. Veterinarians are generally too lazy to find out exactly which job would offer them the highest salary.
- D. Veterinarians, like any other worker, seek to maximize utility, not income.**

Episode 2: Weather

Scene: Weather Forecasts as a Club Good

Length: 50 seconds

Summary:

Club goods, also known as artificially scarce goods, are defined as items that are nonrival, but excludable. Weather forecasts in the United States are widely available to everyone through the National Weather Service (NWS), but private companies, like AccuWeather, have limited the National Weather Service's ability to provide that information to the public. These private companies repackage government data to sell to their clients. It doesn't cost AccuWeather more to provide the service to an additional user (nonrival in production), however, the company can withhold that information from people who don't pay for the premium experience (excludable). Club goods create a deadweight loss to society because the price of the product is greater than the marginal cost of production. In this instance, it can also be deadly.

Relevant Concepts:

Artificially scarce goods, club goods, excludability, public goods, rivalry, types of good

Assessment Question:

If a weather prediction were treated purely as a public good:

- A. anyone can be excluded from enjoying its benefits.
- B. consumers pay a low price for the good.
- C. no one can be excluded from enjoying its benefits.**
- D. consumers must pay a high price to enjoy its benefits.

Episode 3: Money

Scene: Trust in Money

Length: 1 minute and 43 seconds

Summary:

US currency is a form of fiat money that isn't backed by a commodity like gold or silver. For something to be considered money, it must serve three general properties: store of value, a unit of account, and a medium of exchange. Each of these properties can be seen in this clip. In one segment, a lemonade seller will only accept currency and not photos of people. Her lemonade uses dollars as a measure of its value (unit of account) and we expect those dollars to be worth the same amount over a relatively short time period (store of value). Adam, unfortunately, compares older dollars to new ones and hasn't accounted for inflation.

Relevant Concepts:

currency, fiat power, medium of exchange, money, store of value, unit of account

Assessment Question:

Paper money makes it easier for people to buy things, like lemonade. Sellers usually agree to accept paper money in exchange for a good or service. This characteristic most closely corresponds to which function of money:

- A. Store of value.
- B. Medium of exchange.**
- C. Unit of account.
- D. Means of consumption.

Episode 4: Future

Scene: External Benefits of GPS

Length: 2 minutes and 3 seconds

Summary:

The global positioning system (GPS) was originally developed by the US government for military purposes, but it has been made available to private companies since 2000. Allowing private companies to build new products and services using this technology has resulted in a massive increase in technological advancement in the US that provides significantly more economic benefit than the cost of operating GPS satellites. Estimates place the value of GPS at \$1.4 trillion from 1980 to 2019, but the federal government spends relatively little to operate the system.³

Relevant Concepts:

external benefits, externalities, fiscal outlays, government investment, social benefit

Assessment Question:

Which of the following statements about the positive externalities associated with GPS satellites is/are TRUE?

- I. At the social-surplus maximizing level of output, the external benefits equal zero.
 - II. At the unregulated competitive equilibrium, the marginal social benefit is greater than the marginal social cost.
 - III. At any output level, the social benefits are greater than the private (market) benefits.
- A. I, II, and III.
 - B. II only.
 - C. III only.
 - D. II and III.**

³Congress provided about \$2.03 billion to fund the Department of Defense's GPS program in Fiscal Year 2022 (<https://www.gps.gov/policy/funding/>).

Episode 5: Disease

Scene: Investing in Public Health

Length: 1 minute and 58 seconds

Summary:

Economic growth is heavily influenced by investments in both human capital and physical capital. These investments can occur through government expenditures or private investment. Private investment may occasionally be suboptimal due to externalities or other market failures. In these instances, the government may be able to intervene and provide the necessary resources to help individuals fully invest in human or physical capital. This scene highlights how the US government's investment in eradicating diseases like malaria, polio, and measles has enabled individuals to live longer and healthier lives, which also increases their productivity.

Relevant Concepts:

Economic growth, fiscal outlay, government investment, human capital, public health

Assessment Question:

Which of the following fiscal policies would *not* be considered an investment in human capital?

- A. The Federal Reserve purchases treasury bonds.**
- B. Increased spending directed to community colleges.
- C. Creation of reimbursement policies for job training programs.
- D. Increasing the research and development budget at the National Institute of Health.

Episode 6: Change

Scene: Obama is Still Doing His Taxes

Clip Length: 30 seconds

Summary:

In a scene from earlier in the series, Adam stopped by to chat with President Obama. Adam was surprised to see the former President completing his own taxes, but Obama claimed that he enjoyed it. Adam quickly pointed out that it would be more efficient if President Obama hired an accountant. Specialization and trade allow people to see improved efficiency, but doing everything yourself can result in a lot of wasted resources. In this particular scene, which occurs at the end of the series, we see that President Obama is still hard at work on his taxes and he has made a lot of mistakes that he'll need to correct. He doesn't seem to be enjoying it anymore.

Relevant Concepts:

comparative advantage, efficiency, gains from trade, opportunity cost, specialization

Assessment Question:

According to the theory of comparative advantage, a good (or service) should be produced by a person when:

- A. That person has a higher opportunity cost.
- B. Money is the primary medium of exchange.
- C. The person has the lowest opportunity cost.**
- D. The terms of trade are the highest.

5. Conclusion

The opportunities to teach with media have grown in recent years as Netflix has expanded its production capacity and has started producing shows that target a more diverse audience than what is seen on traditional cable television channels. This paper joins the work of previous educators who have identified teachable content on the world's most popular streaming platform (Ben Abdesslem & Picault, 2021). This process also introduces opportunities for educators to make marginal changes to their current teaching practices in order to increase the appeal of economics to the current generation of students (Carrasco-Gallego, 2017). Brief teaching opportunities like the ones outlined above allow an instructor to set aside a few minutes of class to show a real-life application of the material covered in textbooks and lecture slides.

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Appendix A

Table A1: Episode 1: Food

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
1	Obama Does His Own Taxes	comparative advantage, gains from trade, efficiency, opportunity cost, specialization
2	Overwhelmed by Choices	behavioral economics, monopolistic competition, paradox of choice
3	The Value of a Label	credentials, information asymmetry, quality, regulation, signaling
4	A Job for Everyone	compensating differentials, income, labor economics, utility maximization
5	Externalities & Regulation	externalities, government intervention, negative externalities, private benefits, regulation, social costs
6	Subsidizing Farmers	domestic production subsidies, government intervention, infant industry, subsidies, surplus, trade, trade protection, unintended consequences
7	Unintended Consequences of Farming Subsidies	government intervention, subsidies, unintended consequences
8	Rent Seeking in Agriculture	lobbying, misaligned incentives, public choice, rent seeking

Table A2: Episode 2: Weather

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
9	Weather Forecasts as a Public Good	artificially scarce goods, excludability, public goods, rivalry, types of goods
10	Weather Forecasts as a Club Good	artificially scarce goods, excludability, public goods, rivalry, types of goods
11	Rent Seeking in Weather	lobbying, misaligned incentives, public choice, rent seeking
12	Local Pork	lobbying, pork barrel

Table A3: Episode 3: Money

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
13	Trust in Money	currency, fiat power, medium of exchange money, store of value, unit of account
14	Lemonade for Pictures	bartering, double coincidence of wants, money, trade
15	Run for Your Money	bank run, banking, Great Depression, FDIC, institutions, trust, regulation
16	Importance of Financial Stability	assets, bank failure, banking, FDIC, financial stability, Great Recession, insurance

17	Fiscal Stimulus During Covid	aggregate demand, fiscal policy, recession, stimulus, unemployment
18	Monetary Stimulus During Covid	aggregate demand, banking, Federal Reserve, monetary policy, money supply, treasury bonds

Table A4: Episode 4: Future

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
19	GPS as a Public Good	artificially scarce goods, excludability, public goods, rivalry, types of goods
20	External Benefits of GPS	externalities, government investment, negative externalities, regulation, social benefits
21	Federal Investment in Innovation	federal outlays, GDP, government spending, growth, innovation, technology, unintended consequences
22	Unintended Consequences of Drones	incentives, moral hazard, unintended consequences
23	Cost-Benefit Analysis of Government Investment	cost-benefit analysis, efficiency, equity, investment, federal outlays, tradeoffs

Table A5: Episode 5: Disease

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
24	Misaligned Medical Incentives	asymmetric information, incentives, misaligned incentives
25	Investing in Public Health	economic growth, government investment, healthcare
26	Malaria vs. the Bald Eagle	unintended consequences
27	Investing in Healthcare	healthcare, human capital, human capital investments, life expectancy

Table A6: Episode 6: Change

Clip	Title	Relevant Concepts
28	Obama is Still Doing His Taxes	comparative advantage, efficiency, gains from trade, opportunity cost, specialization

Appendix B

Table A7: Key Chapters and Associated Clip Number

Behavioral economics	2, 3, 22, 24
Economic growth	25
Externalities & types of goods	5, 9, 10, 19, 20
Fiscal & monetary policy	17, 18, 21
Foundational concepts	1, 23, 26, 28
International trade	6
Labor economics	4, 27
Money & banking	13, 14, 15, 16
Public choice	8, 11, 12
Taxes & subsidies	7