

The Politics of Repair

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

BEFORE YOU READ

Talk with a partner. Is repairing an object a private consumer choice, or a political act with wider consequences?

1. Match the words (1-6) with the definitions (A-F).

1. **obsolescence** _____

2. **proprietary** _____

3. **interoperable** _____

4. **externality** _____

5. **resilience** _____

6. **mandate** _____

A. officially require something

B. the ability to recover or continue after difficulty

C. owned and controlled by one company

D. a cost or benefit affecting people not directly involved

E. the process of becoming outdated or no longer useful

F. able to work with other systems or products

2. Read the article. The bold words are the vocabulary from Activity 1.

1. Repair is often described as a practical habit: fix a broken item, save money and avoid waste. But the availability of repair is shaped by design, law and market power. A product can become difficult to repair not because its problem is technically impossible, but because a component is glued in place, a manual is unavailable or a diagnostic tool is **proprietary**.

2. This has renewed interest in planned **obsolescence**, in which goods are deliberately designed to become outdated or uneconomical to fix. The term is sometimes used loosely, but the underlying concern is clear: when replacement is consistently easier than repair, companies and consumers may be pushed towards a shorter product life than they actually want.

3. The costs are not confined to the buyer and seller. Discarded electronics, resource extraction and the loss of local repair skills are **externalities**: consequences carried by communities and environments that did not choose the transaction. A cheap device can therefore appear inexpensive only because some costs are hidden elsewhere.

4. Supporters of repair rights argue for spare parts, manuals and standards that make products more **interoperable**. These measures could support independent repairers and make communities more **resilient** when official supply chains fail. Critics warn that open access may create safety, security or intellectual-property risks.

5. The policy question is not whether every product should be repaired by every person. It is whether governments should **mandate** a reasonable repair option for products that are safe to repair. Such a rule would require trade-offs, but it could move repair from a niche virtue to an ordinary expectation.

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UNDERSTAND, DISCUSS AND WRITE

3. Comprehension. Answer in complete sentences. Use the article to help you.

1. Why can a product be difficult to repair even when the problem is technically solvable?

2. What concern lies behind the idea of planned obsolescence?

3. Why are discarded electronics described as an externality?

4. How might repair standards improve resilience?

5. What limited policy does the article suggest?

4. Discuss. Talk in small groups. Give reasons and examples.

- Which products should have a legal right to repair?
- How should safety and security concerns be addressed?
- Who benefits when local repair skills disappear?
- Would a repairability label change what you buy?

5. Homework: Write an opinion paragraph.

Write 220-260 words: Should governments require manufacturers to make consumer products repairable? Evaluate competing interests before reaching a conclusion.

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ANSWER KEY AND TEACHING NOTE

Vocabulary matching

1. obsolescence - E
2. proprietary - C
3. interoperable - F
4. externality - D
5. resilience - B
6. mandate - A

Comprehension answers

1. Why can a product be difficult to repair even when the problem is technically solvable?

Its design or company controls may make access to parts, manuals or diagnostic tools difficult.

2. What concern lies behind the idea of planned obsolescence?

Replacement can become easier than repair, pushing goods into shorter lives than consumers may want.

3. Why are discarded electronics described as an externality?

Their environmental and community costs affect people who were not directly part of the original sale.

4. How might repair standards improve resilience?

They could support local repairers and help communities continue functioning when official supply chains fail.

5. What limited policy does the article suggest?

A government requirement for a reasonable repair option for products that are safe to repair.

Teaching note

Compare vocabulary answers before reading. Help learners plan an argument about repair requirements: competing interests and a conclusion. Accept accurate comprehension paraphrases and supported personal responses.