

The Great Plague Documentary - Viewing Guide

TCE 265: Problem Set 2 (Graunt) - Day 7 STAGING

Video: The Great Plague (Black Death Documentary) | Timeline
Full Length: 1 hour 16 minutes
Recommended Segment: 7:00 - 22:00 (~15 minutes)
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwB1ha70dRA>

Before Watching

Framing Question: You lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. You watched daily death counts, learned about exponential curves, and experienced lockdowns. As you watch this documentary about the 1665 London plague, look for parallels—and differences.

Context: This documentary follows one small alley in London (Cock and Key Alley) during the Great Plague. The records come from parish church wardens who tracked every penny spent—and every death.

Key Moments to Watch For

Timestamp	What Happens	COVID Connection
9:40	Introduction of the Bills of Mortality —weekly one-page reports listing deaths by cause and parish	Daily COVID dashboards, county-level tracking
10:00	"You are looking at the world's first health data. There was never health data before this."	First time many of us watched public health data in real-time
10:30	Deaths listed by cause: "Teeth—27 people died of teeth this week"	Debates about COVID cause-of-death classifications
12:00	"The year 1664 is a big deal. It's the year of the plague."	March 2020
13:00	Watching the numbers rise: Plague 0 → 17 → 43 → 112 → 470 → 725 → 1,843	Exponential curves everyone learned to read
13:30	"This is a city of only 500,000 people"	Scale comparison—London then vs. your city now
14:00	Peak: 7,165 people die in a single week	Worst weeks of COVID in major cities
14:30	"The plague then starts to peter out... for the first time in human history, a pattern appears in the data "	The moment data becomes predictive
15:00	Privy Council orders: infected houses shut up, doors marked with red cross	Quarantine orders, isolation protocols
	Dogs and cats killed (40,000 dogs destroyed)—ironically removing	Unintended consequences of

17:00	the animals that would have killed the rats spreading plague	pandemic policies
19:00	Plague orders issued — "kneejerk response... lock the people up, quarantine 40 days"	Government response debates, lockdown policies
21:00	First victim in the parish: Dorothy Chesington, 12 years old	When data becomes a person

While Watching

As you watch, jot down notes on these prompts:

1. **Data as Story:** How do the Bills of Mortality turn individual deaths into a collective narrative?
 2. **Patterns:** At what point do you think people started to see the plague as *predictable* rather than random punishment from God?
 3. **Parallels:** What felt familiar from your COVID experience? What felt completely foreign?
 4. **The Watchers:** Parish officials tracked every death, every penny. Who plays this role today?
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After Watching: Discussion Questions

1. The documentary says "for the first time in human history, a pattern appears in the data." Why is this such a big deal? What changes when death becomes *predictable*?
 2. The wealthy fled London. The poor were locked in their homes. How did the pandemic affect different social classes differently? Did you see similar dynamics during COVID?
 3. The Bills of Mortality were published weekly and sold for a penny. Who was reading them? Why would ordinary people want this information?
 4. John Graunt—a haberdasher (cloth merchant) with no formal training—would later analyze this data and essentially invent statistics. What does it tell us that an amateur, not a doctor or scientist, made this breakthrough?
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Connection to Jay Walker Video (5 min)

After the documentary segment, we'll watch a short TEDMED talk that explicitly names **John Graunt** and explains what he did with this data:

- From the Bills of Mortality comes **statistics**
- From the Bills of Mortality comes **probability**
- From the Bills of Mortality comes **insurance**
- "This is the world's first pattern of data, and it changes human imagination forever."