

Dust Bowl Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question: *What caused the Dust Bowl?*

Materials:

- Dust Bowl Documents A-E
- Dust Bowl PowerPoint
- Guiding Questions
- Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

- 1) Introduction: Use PowerPoint to establish background information and to introduce the day's central historical question.
 - a. Slide 1: Do now.
 - Students examine the picture, briefly describe what they see, and record when and where they think the photograph was taken.
 - Share out responses.
 - b. Slides 2-4: Establish background information on the Dust Bowl, including the following:
 - The Dust Bowl refers to a period of severe dust storms and soil erosion in the Great Plains during the 1930s.
 - This region included parts of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and smaller parts of New Mexico and Nebraska.
 - There were more than 300 dust storms, also known as "Black Blizzards," between 1933 and 1938. These storms often featured fast moving clouds of dust several miles wide that covered farms and homes, destroyed crops, and made people sick.
 - One of the hardest hit areas was the Oklahoma Panhandle.
 - Many people left the Dust Bowl region, abandoning their homes and to look for work in Western states, such as California. However, many stayed behind.
 - c. Slide 5: Introduce central historical question.
 - Since the 1930s people have debated what caused the Dust Bowl. Historians continue to address this question: Was the Dust Bowl a natural disaster or was it caused by people's actions?

This is a shortened version of a lesson that appears in Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, & Chauncey Monte-Sano's *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School Classrooms* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2012).

- Today we are going to analyze and compare a set of primary and secondary sources to better understand what caused the Dust Bowl.
- 2) Pass out Graphic Organizer and Guiding Questions.
 - a. Students record their first hypothesis based upon anything they know about the Dust Bowl.
 - b. Share out.
 - 3) Pass out Documents A and B.
 - a. Explain that students will now read and compare accounts of the Dust Bowl from two people who lived through it. Explain the purpose and directions for reading the documents:
 - to think about what life was like during the Dust Bowl
 - to compare the similarities and differences of these documents
 - to consider how the documents help you answer the central historical question: What caused the Dust Bowl?
 - b. In pairs, students read documents, answer guiding questions, and fill out graphic organizer.
 - c. Individually, students record second hypothesis.
 - d. Share out hypotheses.

Important to note:

 - *Henderson's letter does not directly address the historical question. However, her rosy description of farming methods of crop production in 1920s and her conclusion that nothing could be done unless it rains, suggest that the Dust Bowl was a natural disaster not caused by people's actions.*
 - 4) Pass out Document C.
 - a. Review directions and explain purposes for reading the document:
 - to address the central historical question
 - to compare, or corroborate this document with Documents A and B
 - b. In pairs, students read documents, answer guiding questions, and fill out graphic organizer.
 - c. Individually, students record third hypothesis.
 - d. Share out hypotheses.
 - 5) Pass out Documents D and E.
 - a. Review directions and explain purposes for reading the document:
 - to address the central historical question
 - to compare, or corroborate this document with Documents A, B, and C.

- b. In pairs, students read documents, answer guiding questions, and fill out graphic organizer.
- c. Individually, students record fourth hypothesis.
- d. Share out hypotheses.

6) Discussion

- a. What caused the Dust Bowl?
- b. Whose hypotheses changed across rounds? How? Why?
- c. Which documents and what evidence did you find most convincing? Why?

Citations

Excerpt from Caroline Henderson's letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, sent July 26, 1935, from the Oklahoma Panhandle. In Alvin O. Turner (Ed.), *Letters From the Dust Bowl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 140-142; 146-147.

Excerpts from Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*, first published in 1940 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 36, 59.

Excerpts from *Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee*, sent to President Roosevelt on August 27, 1936, signed by leaders of eight Federal Agencies, including the Department of Agriculture and Soil Conservation Service. Morris Cooke et al., *Report of Great Plains Drought Area Committee* (Hyde Park, NY: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, 1936). Available at <http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm>

Excerpt from Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plain in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4-5.

Excerpt from Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 15, 30.

Document A: Henderson Letter (modified)

Caroline Henderson started homesteading in the Oklahoma Panhandle in 1907. She was a published writer who wrote for various magazines. The passage below is an excerpt of a letter she wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace in 1935 at the age of 58. Wallace would later credit her with helping America understand farmers' problems and the courage they exhibited.

For twenty-seven years this little spot on the vast expanses of the Great Plains has been the center of all our thought and hope and effort. And marvelous are the changes that we have seen . . . The almost unbroken buffalo grass sod has given way to cultivated fields. The old trails have become wide graded highways. Little towns have sprung up with attractive homes, trees, flowers, schools, churches, and hospitals. Automobiles and trucks, tractors and combines have revolutionized methods of farm work and manner of living. The wonderful crop of 1926 when our country alone produced 10,000,000 bushels of wheat – more it was said than any other equal area in the world – revealed the possibilities of our productive soil under modern methods of farming. It seemed as if at last our dreams were coming true. . . .

Yet now our daily physical torture, confusion of mind, and gradual wearing down of courage, seem to make that long continued hope look like a vanishing dream. For we are in the worst of the dust storm area where “dust to eat” is not merely a figure of speech, but the phrasing of a bitter reality. . . .

In this time of severe stress, credit must be given to the various activities of the federal government. Without such aid as has been furnished, it seems certain that large sections must have been virtually abandoned. Yet common sense suggests that the regions which are no longer entirely self-supporting cannot rely indefinitely upon government aid. So the problem remains and the one satisfactory solution is beyond all human control. Some of our neighbors with small children, fearing the effects upon their health, have left temporarily “until it rains.” Others have left permanently, thinking doubtless that nothing could be worse.

Source: Caroline Henderson's letter to Henry A. Wallace, sent July 26, 1935.

Document B: Svobida Account (modified)

Lawrence Svobida was a young farmer who came to Oklahoma in 1929 and farmed there until 1939. He suffered seven crop failures in eight years. When he left, he wrote an account of his struggles. He wanted to share the story of the “average farmer without sugar coating it,” as he claimed others had. Below are two excerpts from his account.

Excerpt 1:

The **gales** chopped off the plants even with the ground, then proceeded to take the roots out. They did not stop there. They blew away the rich topsoil, leaving the subsoil exposed: and then kept sweeping away the “hard-pan,” which is almost as hard as the concrete.

This was something new and different from anything I had ever experienced before – a destroying force beyond my wildest imaginings. When some of my own fields started blowing, I was utterly **bewildered**. . . .

According to [my neighbors’] information, there was little hope of saving a crop once the wind had started blowing; and the only known method of checking the movement of the soil was the practice of strip listing. This meant running deep parallel **furrows** twenty or thirty feet apart, in an east and west direction, across the path of the prevailing winds. This tends to check the force of the wind along the ground and allows the fine silt-like dust to fall into the open furrows.

Excerpt 2:

There had been **overgrazing** before the coming of the settlers and the invasion of barbed wire, but the **death knell** of the Plains was sounded and the birth of the Great American Desert was **inaugurated** with the introduction and rapid improvement of power farming. Tractors and **combines** made the Great Plains regions a new wheat empire, but in doing so they disturbed nature’s balance, and nature is taking its revenge.

Vocabulary

gales: strong winds, windstorms
bewildered: confused
furrows: trenches, grooves

overgrazing: too much grass eaten by cattle
death knell: bell or signal announcing death
inaugurated: begun
combines: a machine that harvests crops

Source: Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*, first published in 1940.

Document C: Government Report

The passage below is an excerpt from the Report on the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. This report was created by a government committee set up to analyze the causes of the Dust Bowl. Morris Cooke, Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration, chaired the committee, but the leaders of eight federal agencies, including the Department of Agriculture and Soil Conservation Service, signed it.

Personal and Confidential from Morris Cooke.
August 27, 1936

Dear Mr. President,

The Committee has made a **preliminary** study of drought conditions in the Great Plains area with the hope of outlining a long-term program which would **render** future droughts less disastrous. . .

The agricultural economy of the Great Plains will become increasingly unstable and unsafe, in view of the impossibility of permanent increase in the amount of rainfall, unless **overcropping**, overgrazing and improper farm methods are prevented. There is no reason to believe that the primary factors of climate temperature, precipitation and winds in the Great Plains region have undergone any fundamental change. The future of the region must depend, therefore, on the degree to which farming practices conform to natural conditions. Because the situation has now passed out of the individual farmer's control, the reorganization of farming practices demands the cooperation of many agencies, including the local, State, and Federal governments.

Mistaken public policies have been largely responsible for the situation now existing. The Federal Government must do its full share in **remedying** the damage caused by a mistaken homesteading policy, by the stimulation of wartime demands which led to overcropping and overgrazing, and by encouragement of a system of agriculture which could not be both permanent and **prosperous**.

Vocabulary

preliminary: first, introductory

render: make

overcropping: deplete soil by continually planting crops on it

remedying: making right

prosperous: financially successful

Source: Excerpt from the *Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee*, sent to President Roosevelt on August 27, 1936.

Document D: Historian, Professor Donald Worster

*Professor Donald Worster is a leader in the field of environmental history. He is a professor at the University of Kansas and has written several books on environmental topics. The excerpt below is from his book *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*.*

The Dust Bowl took only 50 years to accomplish. . . . It came about because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to. Americans blazed their way across a richly **endowed** continent with a **ruthless**, devastating **efficiency** unmatched by any people anywhere. Some environmental **catastrophes** are nature's work, others are the slowly accumulating effects of ignorance or poverty. The Dust Bowl, in contrast, was the **inevitable** outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth. . . .

The Dust Bowl . . . came about because the **expansionary** energy of the U.S. had finally encountered a **volatile, marginal** land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there. We speak of farmers and plows on the plains and the damage they did, but the language is inadequate. What brought them to the region was a social system, a set of values, an economic order . . . Capitalism, it is my contention, had been the decisive factor in this nation's use of nature.

Vocabulary

endowed: gifted, resourced

ruthless: cruel

efficiency: effectiveness

catastrophes: disasters, tragedies

inevitable: unavoidable, necessary

expansionary: spreading out

volatile: unstable, unpredictable

marginal: of secondary importance

Source: Excerpt from Professor Donald Worster's book titled, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Document E: Historian, Professor R. Douglas Hurt

*Professor R. Douglas Hurt is the head of the history department at Purdue University. He has written numerous books on agricultural history. The excerpt below comes from his book *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*.*

Dust storms in the southern Great Plains, and indeed, in the Plains as a whole, were not unique to the 1930s . . . Many factors contributed to the creation of the Dust Bowl – soils subject to wind erosion, drought which killed the soil-holding vegetation, the **incessant** wind, and technological improvements which facilitated the rapid breaking of the native sod. The nature of southern Plains soils and periodic influence of drought could not be changed, but the technological abuse of the land could have been stopped. This is not to say that mechanized agriculture **irreparably** damaged the land – it did not. New and improved **implements** such as tractors, one-way disk plows, grain drills, and combines reduced plowing, planting, and harvesting costs and increased agricultural productivity. Increased productivity caused prices to fall, and farmers **compensated** by breaking more sod for wheat. At the same time, farmers gave little thought to using their new technology in ways that would **conserve** the soil.

Vocabulary

incessant: nonstop, constant	compensated: adjusted, made do
irreparably: permanently	conserve: protect from harm or destruction
implements: equipment, tools	

Source: Excerpt from Professor R. Douglas Hurt's book titled, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1981).

Guiding Questions

Document A: Henderson

- 1) What type of document is this? When was it written? Why was it written?
- 2) According to Henderson, what are three changes that happened in Oklahoma during the 1910s and 1920s? What is her attitude about these changes?
- 3) How does the author describe life in Oklahoma in 1935? What are two examples of how people experienced the Dust Bowl?
- 4) How does this document help you address the question: What caused the Dust Bowl?

Document B: Svobida

- 1) Who wrote this document? When was it written? Why was it written?
- 2) According to Svobida, how did the dust and wind affect crops?
- 3) What exactly does Svobida mean by the phrase “power farming”? What would be the difference between traditional farming and “power farming”?
- 4) What, according to this Svobida, were two causes of the Dust Bowl?

5) How is Svobida's account similar to and different from Henderson's letter?

Document C: Government Report

1) What kind of document is this? When was it written? Why was it written?

2) What problem is this report addressing?

3) What, according to this report, were three causes of the Dust Bowl?

4) Is this a reliable account? Why or why not?

Document D and E: Professors Worster and Hurt

1) What kind of documents are these? When were they written? Why were they written?

2) What does Professor Worster identify as the primary cause of the Dust Bowl?

3) Do the other documents support this conclusion? Why or why not?

4) What are 4 causes of the Dust Bowl that Professor Hurt identifies?

5) In what ways are Worster and Hurt's accounts different?

Graphic Organizer

Initial hypothesis: What caused the Dust Bowl?

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Round One

<i>Document</i>	<i>Reasons suggested by this document</i>	<i>Evidence from document to support these reasons</i>
<i>Henderson Letter</i>		
<i>Svobida Account</i>		

Second hypothesis: What caused the Dust Bowl?

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Round Two

<i>Document</i>	<i>Reasons suggested by this document</i>	<i>Evidence from document to support these reasons</i>
<i>Government Report</i>		

Third hypothesis: What caused the Dust Bowl?

Round Three

<i>Document</i>	<i>Reasons suggested by this document</i>	<i>Evidence from document to support these reasons</i>
<i>Worster Excerpt</i>		
<i>Hurt Excerpt</i>		

Final Hypothesis: What caused the Dust Bowl?