Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm?

Supporting Questions

1. What was the Dust Bowl?
2. Which farming practices contributed to the Dust Bowl?
3. How did geography and climate play a role in the Dust Bowl?
4. How were people affected by the Dust Bowl?
8th Grade US History Inquiry

Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm?

Arkansas Social Studies Standards  
Era.7.2.USH.6 Construct historical arguments and explanations about the long-term impact of social, economic, political, and cultural changes that occurred during the 1920s utilizing evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Staging the Compelling Question  
Brainstorm a definition of a perfect storm. Create a visual representation of a perfect storm (e.g., cartoon or illustration).

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Formative Performance Task  
Create a chart showing similarities and differences among historical accounts of the Dust Bowl.

Formative Performance Task  
Create a visual graphic comparing farming methods from the mid-1800s to the mid-1930s.

Formative Performance Task  
Write a claim about the impact of geography and climate on the Dust Bowl.

Formative Performance Task  
Write a paragraph about how people were affected by the Dust Bowl.

Featured Sources

Source A: PBS: Overview and pictures from Ken Burns PBS series Dust Bowl
Source B: History.com: Articles and accompanying videos.
Source C: Jason Lusk blog: Dealing with Drought

Source A: Wessel’s Living History Farm: Farming in the 1930s.
Source C: Growing a Nation: The Story of American Agriculture

Source A: Columbia University: Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory article
Source B: National Drought Mitigation Center: Rain follows the plow.
Source C: Encyclopedia of Earth: Dust Bowl
Source D: Great Plains Drought Area Committee: report

Source A: The Atlantic: Letters from the Dust Bowl
Source C: California Odyssey CSU: Dust Bowl Migration Archives
Source D: New York Public Media: Up from the Dust

ARGUMENT  
Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, or essay) that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views.

EXTENSION  
Research the effects of World War I on farming in Europe and the U.S., including crop and land prices and government regulations on farming from early 1900s to mid-1930s. Create a poster on the effects of WWI on farming in the U.S. and how this may have contributed to the Dust Bowl.

UNDERSTAND  
Research governmental policies, economics, environmental changes, climate, movement of people, and land usage and determine the extent to which these things are interconnected.

ASSESS  
Determine how changes in U.S. environmental policies, farming methods and practices, consumption, and land use could prevent another dust bowl.

ACT  
Create a chart or brochure comparing what happened during the Dust Bowl with current conditions in the western part of the United States including climate, erosion, farming, and land use.

*Featured sources are suggested and links are provided. It may be that these links are broken and we apologize in advance for the inconvenience.
Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of The Dust Bowl. By investigating the compelling question “Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm?” students gain understanding through reading a variety of texts and analyzing photographs to determine the major causes of the Dust Bowl. By examining the dust bowl through multiple social studies lenses, students realize how each of the social studies lenses has an impact on the others. They analyze the history and personal stories of the Dust Bowl to determine who or what was responsible for this historic event. The formative performance tasks build on knowledge and skills through the course of the inquiry and help students determine who or what was responsible for this historic event. Students create an evidence-based argument about contributing factors and whether or not the Dust Bowl was a perfect storm.

This inquiry highlights the following additional standards:

- **Era.7.2.USH.6** Construct historical arguments and explanations about the long-term impact of social, economic, political, and cultural changes that occurred during the 1920s utilizing evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

It is important to note that this inquiry requires prerequisite knowledge of historical events and ideas. Thus, students should have already studied the Homestead Act of 1862, government corruption prior to the Progressive Era and Progressive Era conservation efforts and immigration. They should also have studied WWI technological advances and economic effects of the War. Economic growth and prosperity from the late 1800’s through the 1920’s and decline of reforms.

Note: This inquiry is expected to take six or seven 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (e.g., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, featured sources, writing). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. This inquiry lends itself to differentiation and modeling of historical thinking skills while assisting students in reading the variety of sources. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm?” students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by evidence while acknowledging competing perspectives.
Staging the Compelling Question

In staging the compelling question, “Was the Dust Bowl a Perfect Storm?”, teachers may prompt students by asking “What is a perfect storm?” Have students create visual representations of their definition for a perfect storm and explain to the class. [Definition: perfect storm - rare combination of events or circumstances that aggravate a situation drastically resulting in an event of unusual magnitude.]

Analyze photographs of the Dust Bowl. Have students look at a variety of photographs, select one, and analyze that photograph. Students share the photograph they selected, state the reason they selected the photograph, and explain the photograph based on their analysis.

Teacher Notes:

Good sources for photographs are the Library of Congress at http://www.loc.gov/pictures/, the National Archives and Records Administration at https://www.archives.gov/education. The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) site at http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/nws/dust1.html contains many photographs of the dust bowl from various places across the Midwest. The photos under “Meteorological Monsters, Dust” contain specific citation information including caption, date, and location of the photograph.

This is a good time to teach students how to analyze primary sources, specifically photographs, if these skills have not been previously taught. The Library of Congress and the National Archives both have excellent worksheets for assisting students in analyzing a photograph. They also have excellent worksheets for analyzing a variety of types of primary sources. For LOC worksheets look under education at https://www.loc.gov/education/ and click on teacher resources. There is also an online tool for completing analysis worksheets. The teacher’s guides and analysis tool for students can be directly accessed at http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html. The National Archives also has document analysis worksheets under Special Topics and Tools at http://www.archives.gov/education/special-topics.html. The photograph analysis can be directly accessed at http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf.

Consider the power of music for entering into an ongoing historical conversation on the story of the Dust Bowl. Teachers could play the Woody Guthrie song “So Long It's Been Good to Know You” and have students share images and ideas that are created while listening to the song.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—“What was the Dust Bowl?”—has students reading featured sources containing background information on the Dust Bowl. The formative performance task asks students to chart similarities and differences among the texts and show these on a graphic organizer (e.g., t-chart, table). The featured sources for this question are a mix of primary and secondary sources. As students read the sources they can ask the scaffolding questions such as: Who wrote this? Where was it published? Why was it written? Who was/is the intended audience? When was this published? and When was it written? Students can also corroborate the information from the sources by asking questions such as: What do other texts say? Do the texts agree? If not, why? Which sources are most reliable? What are other possible sources for information on this topic?
The Library of Congress (LOC) and the National Archives have some excellent worksheets and resources for teaching students how to analyze a variety of texts (photographs, maps, charts, videos). This supporting question offers an opportunity to teach notetaking skills, summarization, pre-writing, revision, and citing evidence.

The following sources were selected to provide a broad overview and background knowledge of the Dust Bowl.

- **Featured Source A** is the Overview text and photographs accompanying *The Dust Bowl* a film series by Ken Burns shown on PBS. The overview text is available at [http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/about/overview/](http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/about/overview/). Accompanying the PBS series is, “The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History,” written by Dayton Duncan with a preface by Ken Burns, and published by Chronicle Books.

- **Featured Source B** contains three videos: Dust Storms Strike America, Migrant Mother Photo, and the Black Blizzard. These videos range from 2 ½ to 4 minutes. There is also text providing background information and insight on the Dust Bowl from History.com published in 2009 by A+E Networks and available at [http://www.history.com/topics/dust-bowl](http://www.history.com/topics/dust-bowl).

- **Featured Source C** is a blog article on The Dust Bowl by Jason Lusk, Food and Agricultural Economist available at [http://jaysonlusk.com/blog/2014/1/6/dealing-with-drought](http://jaysonlusk.com/blog/2014/1/6/dealing-with-drought). The blog article is included as well as a second blog article written the following day after the author, Mr. Lusk, received many comments and family stories in response to the original post. That post, “More on the Dust Bowl” can be accessed at [http://jaysonlusk.com/blog/2014/3/3/more-on-the-dust-bowl](http://jaysonlusk.com/blog/2014/3/3/more-on-the-dust-bowl). Mr. Lusk has given his permission to use these articles. If you use these in class, please give credit to Mr. Lusk.

### Supporting Question 2

For the second supporting question—“Which farming practices contributed to the Dust Bowl?”—students create a visual graphic comparing farming methods from the mid-1800s to the mid-1930s. In addition to the resources from the previous supporting question, the featured sources provide students with additional materials that allow them to look at a variety of farming techniques, technological advances in farming and equipment, and the results of these advances. Graphic organizers and templates for notetaking, notetaking strategies (Cornell, 2 column, outlining) may assist students in developing the skills necessary to take good notes, aid in reading comprehension, and develop their writing.

**Featured Sources:**

- **Featured Source A** is Wessel’s Living History Farm. “Farming in the 1930s” available at [http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/farminginthe1930s.html](http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/farminginthe1930s.html).


- **Featured Source C** is Growing a Nation; the Story of American Agriculture [https://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline/1930.htm](https://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline/1930.htm).

### Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“How did geography and climate play a role in the Dust Bowl?”—asks students to make a claim explaining the relationship(s) among farming practices, geography, and the environment/climate. In
addition to the previous featured sources, the sources for this task provide students with new information that allow them to examine the relationship between the geography of a region and the environment or climate while analyzing the impact of farming practices. Students gain insight into the interconnectedness of human actions, climate changes and geography on the environment from the previous supporting question and the formative performance tasks. Graphic organizers and templates for notetaking and notetaking strategies (Cornell, 2-3 column, outlining, cause/effect, sequence of events) may assist students in organizing information and developing the skills necessary to continue developing reading comprehension, take good notes, and determine the most important information. After they have read and analyzed the source material, students will make a claim about the impact of geography and climate on the Dust Bowl. The claim should be a declarative statement, something such as “Increasing temperatures contributed to poor harvest and soil loss in middle America in the 1930s.” This claim would then be followed with information serving as evidence to supporting the claim.

Featured Sources:

- **Featured Source B** “Rain Follows the Plow?” is from the National Drought Mitigation Center and available at [http://drought.unl.edu/DroughtBasics/DustBowl/RainFollowsThePlow.aspx](http://drought.unl.edu/DroughtBasics/DustBowl/RainFollowsThePlow.aspx)
- **Featured Source D** "Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee” is available at [http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm)

**Supporting Question 4**

For the fourth supporting question—“How were people affected by the Dust Bowl?”—students summarize three letters written in the 1930s from everyday people struggling in the Dust Bowl. In addition to the sources from the previous supporting questions, the featured sources here provide students with new materials that allow them to understand how life changed for a variety of people during the Dust Bowl. Everyone had to adapt to the environmental, economic, and social changes that occurred during the late 1920s through the 1930s.

Students’ summary should include specific information as evidence to support claims about the everyday lives of the people who wrote these letters. The summary will serve as a good practice for students for the type of argumentation needed in the summative tasks. Teachers may also want to select other letters from the collections below and jigsaw or create other grouping activities for reading and writing about the letters. A single letter from each of the collections listed below is provided as a featured source for this task.

Featured Sources:

- **Featured Source Collection B** Mrs. Roosevelt November 1937. [http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/fm1137.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/fm1137.htm)
- **Featured Source Collection C** “Dust Bowl Migration Archives” from the California Odyssey CSU is
Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined discrepancies in a variety of historical accounts, changes in farming methods and technological advances, the roles of geography and climate, and ways in which a variety of people were affected by the Dust Bowl. Students have shown comprehension of multiple sources by corroborating evidence; they have analyzed relationships among geographic regions, technological advances, migration, and climate changes by creating info and visual graphics, writing letters and summaries, and presenting their conclusions to others.

Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument using multiple sources to answer the compelling question “Was the Dust Bowl a perfect storm?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster, visual presentation, or essay.

Students’ arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- The Dust Bowl was a perfect storm because industrialization and technological advances caused farming methods to change at the same time the geographic area was experiencing a drought and topsoil was eroding.
- The Dust Bowl was a perfect storm because a perfect storm is a rare combination of events or circumstances that aggravate a situation drastically resulting in an event of unusual magnitude. The drought combined with new farming machines and methods of increasing crop production set the stage for the Dust Bowl.
- The Dust Bowl was not a perfect storm because as farmers changed their methods of farming to increase crop production they could see top soil was eroding, crops needed more water, dust was increasing, and people were being affected in adverse ways.

To extend their arguments, teachers may have students research the effects of World War I on farming in Europe and the U.S., including crop and land prices. Research government regulations on farming in the early 1900s to mid-1930s. Write an informational essay in which you discuss the effects of WWI on farming in the U.S. and how this may have contributed to the Dust Bowl.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by drawing on their comprehension of the intricate balance and relationship among people, technology, geography, and the environment. To understand, students can make an inference whether another dust bowl is possible. To assess the issue, students answer the question "Has the United States instituted enough changes in environmental policies and farming methods and practices to prevent another dust bowl?" To act, students create a chart or brochure comparing what happened during the Dust Bowl with current conditions in the western part of the United States including climate, erosion, farming, and land use. Share the final product. Dust Bowl Drought comparisons of several time periods can be found at http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/paleo/drought/drght_history.html.