
What Caused the Dust Bowl?

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Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas, April 18, 1935. NOAA Photo Library, Historic NWS Collection.

Overview: In the 1930s America was hit by very bad times. These were the years of the Great Depression. In cities and in small towns across the land, banks were failing, businesses were closing, and workers were being fired. But in some ways farmers were hit hardest of all, and few farmers were hit harder than those in the Southern Great Plains. This region has come to be known as the Dust Bowl. The question for this Mini-Q is what caused the Dust Bowl tragedy.

The Documents:

Document A: Dusters

Document B: Grass

Document C: Fred Folkers and his tractor (with photograph)

Document D: Acreage Under Plow (chart)

Document E: Rainfall on the Plains in the 1930s

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: The Dust Bowl

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The Background: The granddaddy duster had struck on April 14, 1935. In Baca County, Colorado, they called it Black Sunday and it just about did everybody in. Now it was late May and the Osteen family had a decision to make. The little dugout with its dirt floors had been home to nine children. Now with father dead and the older kids mostly gone, it was just mom, Ike, his older brother Oscar and the two girls. Mom had already said she was walking away and taking the girls to live in town. Oscar and Ike could have the 320-acre farm. She was through with it. Ike had just graduated second in his class at Walsh High School and had given a little speech about how he loved Baca. He was the first Osteen ever to graduate from high school. But now what to do? Oscar said he was staying. He didn't know anything else and some day the rains would come back. The orchard was all dead but the elm tree was still alive... and so was the mule.

Decision: You are Ike Osteen. You are 17 years old. It is dawn on May 28, 1935. You have a bundle of clothes tied up in an old shirt, a paper bag with two jackrabbit sandwiches, and a canteen of water. You are sitting at the table writing a note to Oscar saying he can have the farm, that you are walking up to Springfield to try to get a job with the railroad. But you stop writing. Is this what you really want to do? The job is a long shot. You look out the open door at the fields of dust and dirt. You don't have a dollar to your name.

Your Task: With a partner talk through Ike's situation. Will you leave? You love your brother but you've got to be true to yourself. Jot down your reasons for leaving or staying.

Reasons to Stay

Reasons to Leave

Your Decision:

What Caused the Dust Bowl?

On Thursday, April 18, 1935, a huge, black, billowing cloud piled up on the western horizon. For Stratford, Texas, and thousands of farms and small towns, it was the arrival of another dust storm, one of more than 300 that would make an unwelcome visit to the Southern Great Plains during the 1930s.

For thousands of years the Southern Plains were covered by **shortgrass prairie** and home to vast herds of twenty or thirty million buffalo. In more recent times, people arrived. First came the Apache, the Comanche, and the Kiowa. Shortly after the Civil War, there came a few thousand cowboys and several million cattle. Then came the farmer.

The first farmers arrived in the 1880s. Word had gotten out back East that the Southern Great Plains was good for wheat. Yes, rainfall was a bit spotty, but the land was cheaper than farmland in Arkansas or Illinois. Besides, it was said that rain would follow the plow. Grow crops and clouds would form.

With few trees for lumber, many of these early farmers lived in **soddies**, houses made of earth and grass. Soddies were soon replaced by wood frame houses. A severe drought in the 1890s caused some farmers to move away, but then the federal government sweetened the pot. A new **Enlarged Homestead Act** passed in 1909 offered 320 acres of land to anyone who could hang on for three years. Thousands of new farm families took up the offer. In addition, the giant XIT ranch on the Texas **panhandle** sold off much of its three million acre spread to wanna-be farmers. Wheat would replace cattle as the new king of the Southern Plains.

Wheat fever was in the air. The railroad sent out branch lines to small towns, and more wheat could get to market. World War I, which brought so much pain to Europe, was good for Plains farmers. A hungry Europe bought Kansas wheat. Wheat that sold for 93 cents a bushel in 1914 was close to \$2.50 in 1919. More families moved in. Small towns popped up like spring flowers. Boise City out near the end of the

Oklahoma panhandle sported a theater, a newspaper, a furniture store, a bank, and several cafes.

But then trouble came. The Great Depression of the 1930s was the first blow. Unemployment back East made it harder to sell wheat. Sadly, the Depression did not come alone. What made life on the Southern Plains almost unbearable were the dust

storms. In the middle thirties these wind-driven **dusters** darkened the midday sky and carried off millions of tons of precious topsoil as far as Washington DC and New York City. During the 1930s more than three million plains settlers left their farms – some for town, some for a neighboring state, some for California. Many more, however, stayed put, covering their windows with a water-soaked sheet, eating jackrabbit stew at a kitchen table where an “eating” cloth covered all the plates and drinking cups. Children died from breathing in dust. They called it “dust pneumonia.” Writer Timothy Egan has titled his book on Dust Bowl history as *The Worst Hard Time*.

But exactly what happened to cause this worst hard time? Examine the documents that follow and do your best to answer the question before us: *What caused the Dust Bowl?*



Background Essay Questions

1. What two states in the Dust Bowl region have panhandles?
2. Could a child born in a soddy in the 1880s have been a farmer during the Dust Bowl years? Explain your thinking.

3. Define or explain each of these terms:

shortgrass prairie

soddies

Enlarged Homestead Act

panhandle

dusters

4. What economic effect did World War I have on Plains wheat farmers? Explain.
5. List three pieces of evidence that support the idea that the Dust Bowl was “the worst hard time.”
6. Did most people leave the Southern Plains during the Dust Bowl years?

1929 – US unemployment is 1.6 million

1932 – US unemployment is 12.1 million

1933 – Prohibition is repealed

1934 – Rainfall in Dalhart, Texas under 10 inches

1935 – Soil Conservation Service created to stop erosion in Dust Bowl

1936 – Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in Olympics in Nazi Berlin

1939 – John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is published

Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

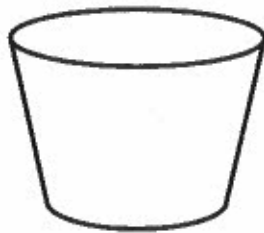
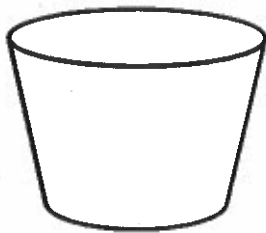
Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. Is there any term in the question that needs definition?
3. Restate the question so that your interpretation of the term “Dust Bowl” is clearly understood.

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Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using any clues from the Mini-Q question and the document titles on the cover page, create possible bucket labels.



Document A

Source: Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, Oxford University Press, 1979.

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The story of the southern plains in the 1930s is essentially about dust storms, when the earth ran amok. And not once or twice, but over and over for the better part of a decade: day after day, year after year, of sand rattling against the window, of fine powder caking one's lips, of springtime turned to despair....

In the memory of older plains residents, the blackest year was 1935.... On 15 March, Denver reported that a serious dust storm was speeding eastward. Kansans ignored the radio warnings, went about their business as usual, and later wondered what had hit them. Small-town printer Nate White was at the picture show when the dust reached Smith Center: as he walked out the exit, it was as if someone had put a blindfold over his eyes; he bumped into telephone poles,

skinned his shins on boxes and cans in the alleyway, fell to his hands and knees, and crawled along the curbing to a dim houselight....

Livestock and wildlife did not have even ... crude defenses. "In a rising sand storm," wrote Margaret Bourke-White, "cattle quickly become blinded. They run around in circles until they fall and breathe so much dust that they die. Autopsies show their lungs caked with dust and mud."...

Avis Carlson told what it was like at night: "A trip to water to rinse the grit from our lips. And then back to bed with washcloths over our noses. We try to lie still, because every turn stirs the dust on the blankets. After a while, if we are good sleepers, we forget."

Document Analysis

1. Does this document contain primary source material? Explain.
2. What does the author mean when he says "the earth ran amok"?
3. What problem was shared by both people and cattle?
4. Does this document do a better job of describing dust storm conditions or explaining causes behind the dust storm problem?
5. In a short essay entitled, "What Caused the Dust Bowl?" how might you use this document?

Document B

Source: Texas sheepherder, in Stuart Chase, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1936.

“Grass is what counts. It’s what saves us all – far as we get saved....
Grass is what holds the earth together.”

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The most common short grass in the Dust Bowl region was buffalo grass. It only grew about four inches high and produced a tough grassy mat that looked like a well-grazed meadow.

Document Analysis

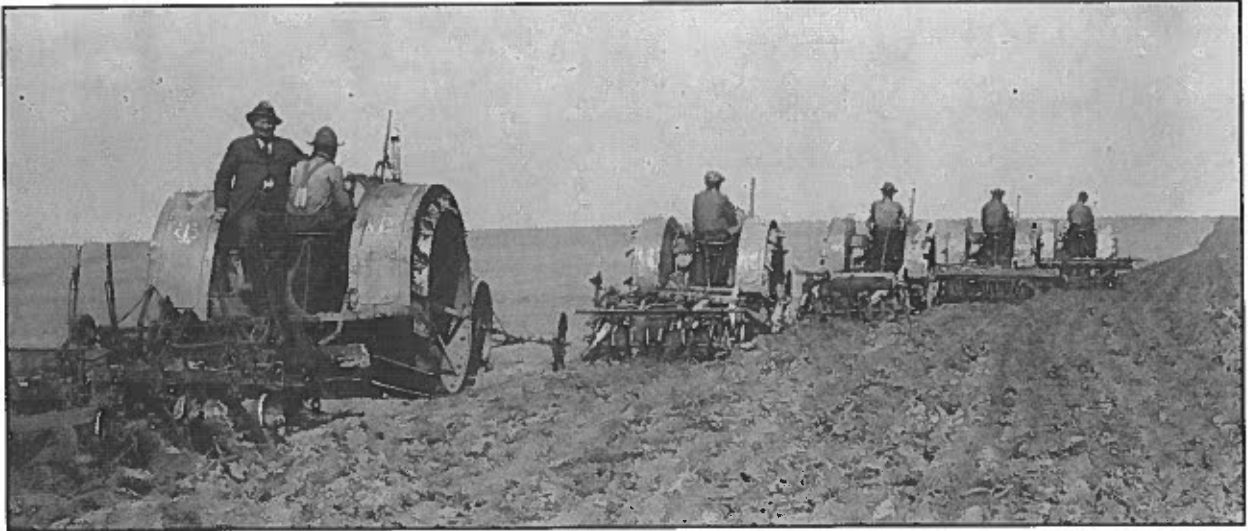
1. What do you suppose the Texas sheepherder means when he says that grass “saves us all”?
2. The sheepherder also says that grass “holds the earth together.” What does he mean?
3. How does this document help answer the question, “What caused the Dust Bowl?” Explain.
4. The visual above is a typical view of the “grass” described by Chase. What is likely to happen once the grass is removed to plant crops.

Document C

Source: Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2006.

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With a horse-drawn plow, Fred Folkers produced nearly enough to stay afloat. What changed everything for him, and other dryland farmers, was the tractor.... A tractor did the work of ten horses. With his new combine, Folkers could cut and thresh the grain in one swoop, using just a fraction of the labor.... Folkers plowed nearly his entire square mile, and then paid to rent nearby property and ripped up that grass as well. By the late 1920s, his harvest was up to ten thousand bushels of wheat – a small mountain of grain. What’s more, there was now an easy way to get the wheat of Fred Folkers ... to the rest of the world. In 1925, a train finally arrived in Boise City....



Wheat king Simon Fishman (in coat and tie) and his employees working the land. Greeley County, Kansas, 1925.

Document Analysis

1. Why did Fred Folkers need a tractor, a plow, and a combine? What did each do?
2. The author says that the tractor “changed everything.” What does he mean?
3. How does this document help answer the question, “What Caused the Dust Bowl?”
4. What detail from the photo might you use to support the details in the quote about Fred Folkers?

Document E

Source: High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Normal Annual Precipitation for Five Dust Bowl Towns	
Town	Normal Precipitation (inches)
Clovis, New Mexico	17.64
Boise City, Oklahoma (panhandle)	17.00
Dalhart, Texas (panhandle)	17.87
Burlington, Colorado	16.38
Goodland, Kansas	18.02

Note: John Wesley Powell, the great Western explorer, determined that 20 inches of rain annually was the minimum for successful farming on the Plains. But, he said, "... at 20 inches agriculture will not be uniformly successful from season to season."

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Source: From Randy Francis, *The Texas Dust Bowl in Historical Perspective*, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1998.

Actual Precipitation for Dallam County, Texas (County Seat, Dalhart)	
1923	33.40 inches
1924	15.32
1931	14.66
1932	20.09
1933	10.14
1934	9.78
1935	13.31
1936	9.93
1937	14.48
1938	14.08
1939	14.75
1940	12.74

Document Analysis

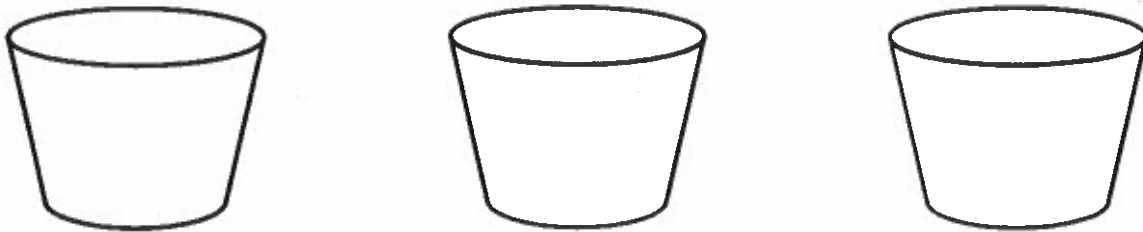
1. According to John Wesley Powell, how much annual rainfall was necessary to grow crops in arid regions like the Southern Great Plains?
2. To the nearest inch, what was the average annual rainfall of the five Dust Bowl towns?
3. From 1931 to 1940, how many years was Dalhart's rainfall below normal?
4. How do these charts together help answer the question, "What caused the Dust Bowl?"

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

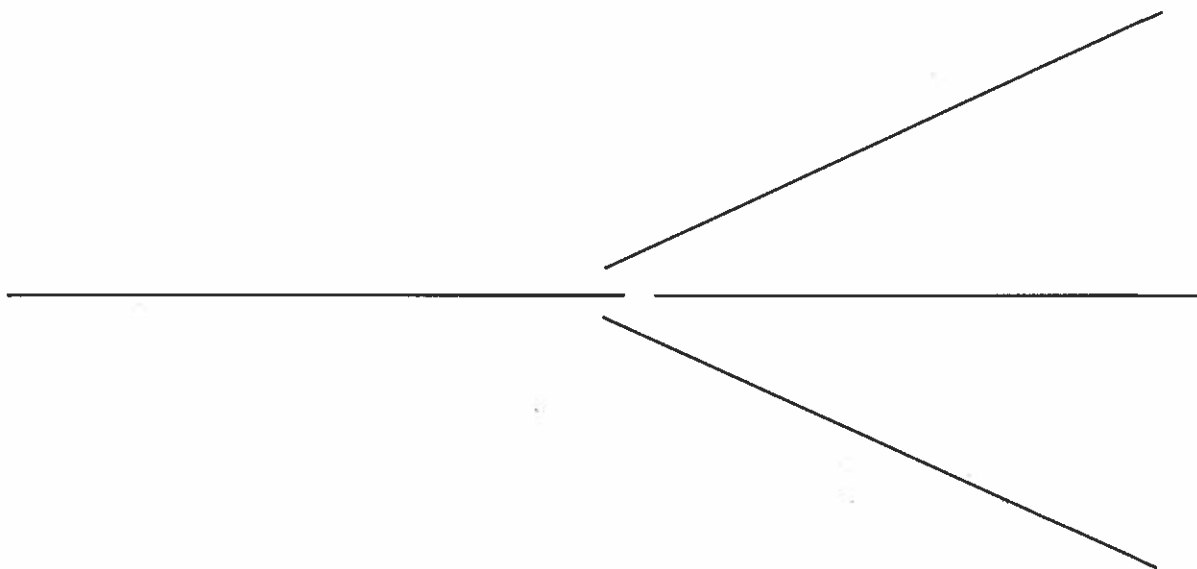
Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write final bucket labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. It is okay to put a document in more than one bucket. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.

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Thesis Development and Roadmap

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your roadmap. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The roadmap is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title

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Paragraph #1

Grabber

Background

Stating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and roadmap

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument: connecting evidence to the thesis

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5

Conclusion: Restatement of main idea along with possible insight or wrinkle