

Imagine East Mesa Writing Benchmark #3

Grades 7, Prompt for Informative Writing
Common Core Standard W.CCR.2

Student Name: _____

Directions:

Your teacher will read through all directions with you. Use the resources provided to you to brainstorm ideas and compose an essay answering the following prompt.

Great historical events often have deep effects upon the people who lived through them. Depending on the person and the situation, those effects can be very different-or not. The Dust Bowl of the 1930's, also known as the Dirty Thirties, was one of these events. This period of severe dust storms greatly damaged the ecology and agriculture of the U.S. and Canadian prairies etching itself into the memory of those who lived through it.

You are going to watch a video and read two texts about the Dust Bowl. As you read and re-read these texts, think about what the texts show you about how Dust Bowl seems to have affected the individual people who lived through it. Finally, using these texts, you will compose an informative essay explaining your thinking.

Prompt:

For the essay, your focus question is:

According to these texts and the video, how did the Dust Bowl change the lives of people who lived through it?

Be sure to use evidence from the texts and video to support and develop your thinking.

WRITER'S CHECKLIST: Remember, a good informative essay:

- *Has a clear introduction*
- *States a focus/position statement clearly, precisely, and thoughtfully*
- *Uses specific evidence from the text(s) to support and develop the position, and explains that evidence logically*
- *Concludes effectively*
- *Uses precise language*
- *Shows control over conventions*

Source # 1

The Drought

1 The drought hit first in the eastern part of the country in 1930. In 1931, it moved toward the west. By 1934 it had turned the Great Plains into a desert. "If you would like to have your heart broken, just come out here," wrote Ernie Pyle, a roving reporter in Kansas, just north of the Oklahoma border, in June of 1936. "This is the dust-storm country. It is the saddest land I have ever seen."

2 The Dust Bowl got its name on April 15, 1935, the day after Black Sunday. Robert Geiger, a reporter for the Associated Press, traveled through the region and wrote the following: "Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer's tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent – if it rains." The term stuck, spreading to radio broadcasts and publications, in private letters and public speeches.

3 The Soil Conservation Service used the term on their maps to describe "the western third of Kansas, Southeastern Colorado, the Oklahoma Panhandle, the northern two-thirds of the Texas Panhandle, and northeastern New Mexico." The SCS Dust Bowl region included some surrounding area, to cover one-third of the Great Plains, close to 100 million acres, 500 miles by 300 miles. It is thought that Geiger was referring to an earlier image of the plains coined by William Gilpin, who had compared the Great Plains to a fertile bowl, rimmed by mountains. Residents hated the label, which was thought to play a part in diminishing property values and business prospects in the region.

4 The Drought alone did not cause the black blizzards. Although dry spells are unavoidable in the region, occurring roughly every 25 years, it was the combination of drought and misuse of the land that led to the incredible devastation of the Dust Bowl years. Originally covered with grasses that held the fine soil in place, the land of the southern plains was plowed by settlers who brought their farming techniques with them when they homesteaded the area. Wheat crops, in high demand during World War I, exhausted the topsoil. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep herds stripped the western plains of their cover. When the drought hit, the land just blew away in the wind.

5 A letter from an Oklahoma woman, later published in Reader's Digest magazine, recalls June of 1935. "In the dust-covered desolation of our No Man's Land here, wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and Vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home

from the wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is almost a hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor."

6 Beginning in 1935, federal conservation programs were created to rehabilitate the Dust Bowl, changing the basic farming methods of the region by seeding areas with grass, rotating crops, and using contour plowing, strip plowing, and planting "shelter belts" of trees to break the wind. Farmers were defensive when outsiders criticized their farming methods. Only when they were paid did they begin to put the new farming techniques into practice. The dollar per acre they earned often meant the difference between being able to stay a bit longer or having to abandon their land. As historian Robert Worster wrote, "The ultimate meaning of the dust storms of the 1930s was that America as a whole, not just the plains, was badly out of balance with its natural environment. Unbounded optimism about the future, careless disregard of nature's limits and uncertainties, uncritical faith in Providence, devotion to self-aggrandizement – all these were national as well as regional characteristics."

Take from: Public Broadcasting Organization (PBS)-The American Experi

Source # 2

March 8, 1936

Dear Evelyn:

7 Since I wrote to you, we have had several bad days of wind and dust. On the worst one recently, old sheets stretched over door and window openings, and sprayed with kerosene, quickly became black and helped a little to keep down the irritating dust in our living rooms. Nothing that you see or hear or read will be likely to exaggerate the physical discomfort or material losses due to these storms. Less emphasis is usually given to the mental effect, the confusion of mind resulting from the overthrow of all plans for improvement or normal farm work, and the difficulty of making other plans, even in a tentative way. To give just one specific example: the paint has been literally scoured from our buildings by the storms of this and previous years; we should by all means try to 'save the surface'; but who knows when we might safely undertake such a project? The pleasantest morning may be a prelude to an afternoon when the 'dust

devils' all unite in one hideous onslaught. The combination of fresh paint with a real dust storm is not pleasing to contemplate.

8 The prospects for a wheat crop in 1936 still remain extremely doubtful. There has been no moisture of any kind since the light snow of early January. On a seventy-mile drive yesterday to arrange for hatchery chicks and to sell our week's cream and eggs, we saw more wheat that would still respond to immediate rainfall than I, with my stay-at-home habits, had expected to see. A few fields were refreshingly green and beautiful to look upon. There seems no doubt that improved methods of tillage and protection are already yielding some results in reducing wind erosion. But rain must come soon to encourage growth even on the best fields if there is to be any wheat harvest. Interspersed with the more hopeful areas are other tracts apparently abandoned to their fate. A field dotted thickly with shoulder-high hummocks of sand and soil bound together by the inevitable Russian thistles presents little encouragement to the most ardent conservationist. My own verdict in regard to plans for the reclaiming of such land would be, 'Too late.' Yet such fields are a menace to all the cultivated land or pasture ground around them and present a most difficult problem.

9 The two extremes I have just suggested —that is the slight hope even yet for some production on carefully tilled fields, and the practically hopeless conditions on abandoned land are indicative of the two conflicting tendencies now evident through an extensive section of the high plains. On the one hand, we note a disposition to recognize a mistake, to turn aside from the undertaking with the least possible loss and direct one's time and energy to some new purpose. On the other hand, we observe that many seem determined to use even the hard experiences of the past, their own mistakes and other people's, as warning signals, pointing the way to changes of method and more persistent and effective effort right where they stand.

Taken from: The Atlantic Magazine-archive