

RESOURCE FOR EDUCATORS: Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition

The materials here are excerpted from resources created by the Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago through the [Terra Foundation for American Art's American Art at the Core of Learning initiative](#). Terra Foundation staff contributed to this guide. Excerpts of this curriculum have been posted by [PBS](#) in conjunction with the American Masters documentary *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*.

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Dorothea Lange at the MoCP

The Museum of Contemporary Photography's permanent collection holds over 500 works by Dorothea Lange (United States, 1895-1965). Most of these photographs were acquired through a generous gift from Katharine Taylor Loesch (United States, 1922- 2012). Taylor Loesch was the daughter of Dorothea Lange and economist Paul Schuster Taylor (United States, 1895-1984), Lange's collaborator and second husband.

Though she is best known for her depression-era photographs that came to shape our view of one of the most tumultuous eras of American history, the career of Dorothea Lange was long and varied. Her keen interest in the lives of ordinary people led her to travel and photograph diverse subjects across the US and around the world. A full biography on Lange and a description of the bodies of work held in the MoCP collection can be found [here](#).



Dorothea Lange, Resettlement Administration photographer, in California. Photo by FSA photo by Rondale Partridge, via Library of Congress; not in the MoCP collection

Lesson Summary

Dorothea Lange's 1936 image *Migrant Mother* is one of the most widely known images in the history of photography. This lesson stresses developing students' fluency at reading across a range of types of text, with a focus on visual images, as students deepen their understanding of this iconic image. Students will conduct a slow and careful "reading" of the image, noting details that support their observations and interpretations. Students will then consider this work in the light of a caption that Lange wrote for another photograph of the same family. They will read informational texts about Dorothea Lange and her work with the Farm Security Administration as well as the Dust Bowl to expand their knowledge of the photo's cultural and historical context. Next, students will compare *Migrant Mother* with the six additional frames Lange made of the scene that day. Finally, students will consider how the work fits within the tradition of documentary photography.

The Dust Bowl

From around 1930-40 the southwestern Great Plains region that encompassed the western parts of Kansas, southeastern Colorado, the Oklahoma Panhandle, the northern Texas Panhandle, and northeastern New Mexico were suffered a severe drought and devastating winds (that lead to dust storms). Misleading information about the agricultural potential of the land led farmers to use improper farming techniques that exacerbated the vulnerability of the land. Low crop prices and high machinery costs also lead to increased vulnerability since the farmers needed to cultivate more land, poorer farmland was being utilized. Overall, these led to the depletion of much needed nutrients and soil and increased the regions susceptibility to drought. Those who couldn't leave had to endure the severe dust storms, emotional and financial stress, and just general uncertainty around their future. The effects on the region lead the federal government under Franklin D. Roosevelt to enact relief programs through the New Deal. Relief included providing emergency supplies, cash, establishing health care facilities and government-based markets for farm goods, providing the right technology and advice to appropriately farm on the land, along with many other relief measures. The population, through determination, dignity, and optimism, was able to survive one of the worst droughts in American history. To learn more about the dust bowl and about life on the camps and farms you can visit the Library of Congress [here](https://drought.unl.edu/Dustbowl/Home.aspx).¹

Lesson Overview

Grade Levels: 5-12 (May be adapted for use by other grades)

¹ <https://drought.unl.edu/Dustbowl/Home.aspx>



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*,
Nipomo California, 1936

Closely Examine *Migrant Mother*

First, ask students to look closely at the image, considering the following questions:

- Describe what you see and notice.
- Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- What can you tell about how the photographer made the picture?
- What do we learn about the people in the photograph? How?
- Can you tell where and when this image might have been made? If so, how?
- What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that communicated?
- What assumptions might you have made about what is happening in this image?
- Can you tell how the photographer feels about her subjects? If so—how?
- Do you feel any personal connections to this work? Explain.

Dorothea Lange created this portrait in March of 1936. Although the photograph is now known as *Migrant Mother*, the title Lange gave the image was in a longer notation style, in line with the others she made at the time. It reads:

Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven children without food. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tires in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute. Nipomo, California.

Adding Cultural Context: Lange and the Great Depression

Dorothea Lange created thousands of photographs to document the poor conditions of Americans during the Great Depression (1929–1939), the period after the stock market crashed which led to little business activity in the United States and around the world. Lange photographed workers on strike, people living on the street, and hungry families waiting in line for food. *Migrant Mother* was just one of many images of the hundreds of thousands of desperate farming families who were forced to leave their homes in search of work, as seen in some other images Lange made during this time here.



Left to right: Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Bread Line*, 1933; Grandmother of twenty-two children, from a farm in Oklahoma; eighty years old. Now living in camp on the outskirts of Bakersfield, California. "If you lose your pluck you lose the most there is in you - all you've got to live with," 1936

Some farmers couldn't make enough money to keep their lands because of the struggling economy. Other farms were abandoned because of the horrible dust storms and a lack of rain. The dust and drought made the land impossible to use in sections of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas, a region that came to be known as the Dust Bowl.

In 1935 the United States government created the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an organization to help those most affected by the Great Depression. The FSA hired photographers including Lange to record the difficult conditions in rural America during the time in images. These photographs, like *Migrant Mother*, were used to help convince Americans that people, especially those migrants camping near rural farms, were suffering and

needed help. While many of the FSA photographers pursued their individual interests in what they photographed; they were ultimately working on assignment for the US government. Their images were used in part to promote government programs and were eventually archived in the Library of Congress. The FSA photographers did not have control over how the images they created were reproduced, distributed, or archived.

Shortly after *Migrant Mother* was made, the photograph was printed in the *San Francisco News* with the title "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squaller", on March 10th, 1936 [squaller is another spelling of squalor] As a result of the image, the government rushed 20,000 pounds of food to the camp where the family stayed. It is now one of the most famous images of the Great Depression, and one of the best-known and most widely published photographs ever made.



Dorothea Lange, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, 1938

The Documentary Tradition

The documentary tradition includes a broad spectrum of artists and subject matter and dates all the way to back to the camera's inception in the early 19th century and the argument that it is objectively truthful. To be a documentary photographer, is to faithfully and accurately "document" people, places, objects, and events throughout history. The act of documentary photography can also transmit memory as the subject matter is cemented into the image. Photographers such as [Eugene Atget](#), [Lewis Hine](#), and [Gordon Parks](#) are three exemplar artists who have worked in the documentary tradition, each in their own distinct way. Eugene Atget set out to photograph the streets of Paris and the everyday scenes in order to form an encyclopedic mass of images of Paris on the brink of modernity and the images were supposed to act as source material for other artists. Lewis Hine's social documentary work turned the camera on issues of child labor, harsh realities of the laborer, and immigration, supplying his subjects with a tender space to become visible, powerful, and dignified in a society that wouldn't let them. Gordon Parks, also working in the social documentary realm focused on issues such as poverty, race relations, and civil rights as he photographed a segregated America, while risking his own life in the process. As seen here, the photographer is tasked with packing the frame with information that educates the viewers as well as preserving those places, objects, events, and people in time.

Questions for Discussion:

- What can photography do well in creating a record or document? What are its limitations?
- In what ways can documentary photographs be "truthful?" How could a documentary photograph be misleading?

- What are some of the rights and responsibilities of those who tell the stories of others through photographs or words?
- What kind of power dynamics do you think are involved in making documentary images?

Additional Views of *Migrant Mother*

Lange made six photographs of the mother and her children. In an interview about the photograph, Lange made this statement on the moment she made *Migrant Mother*:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.²

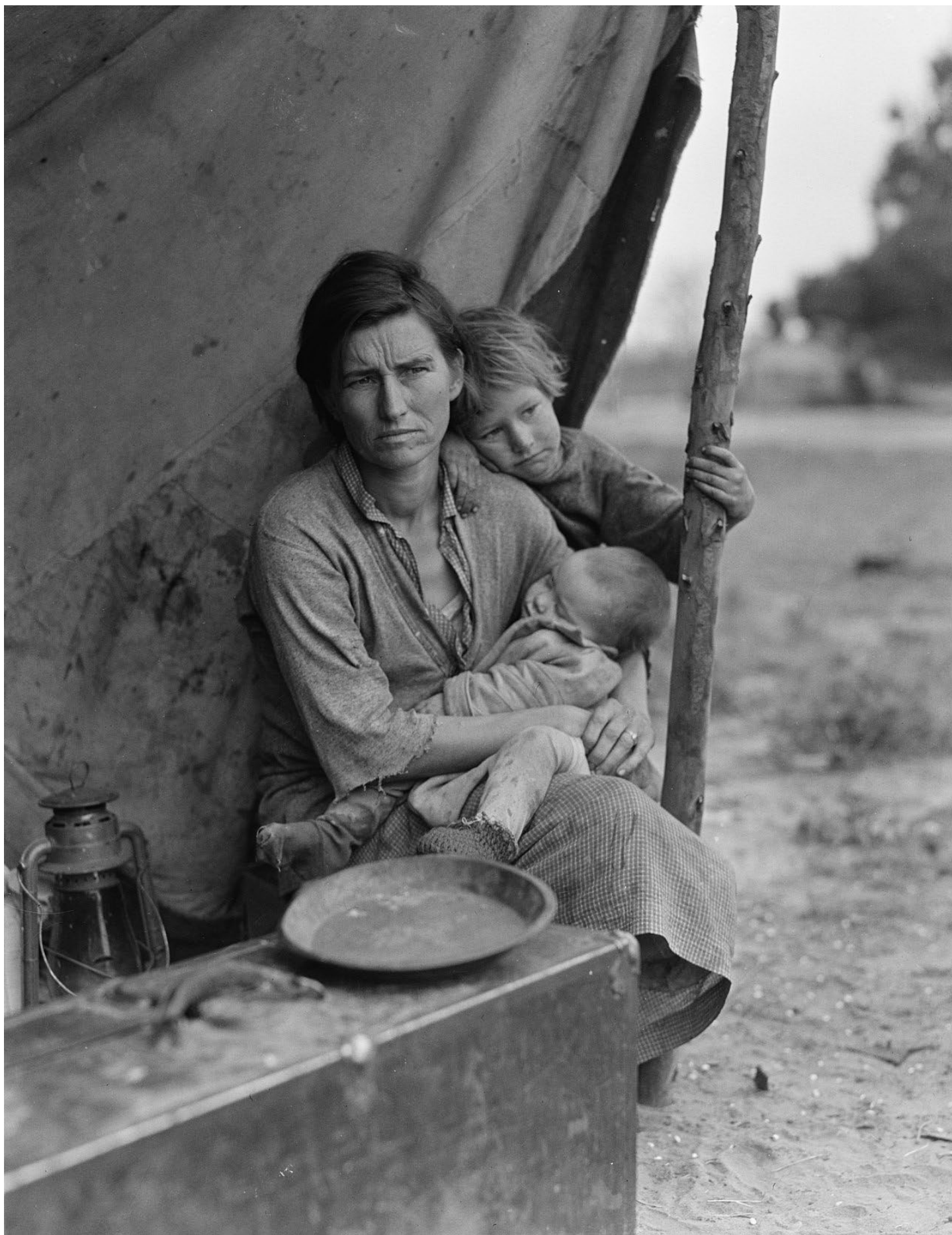
Look closely at the additional images, then consider the questions for looking and discussion below.

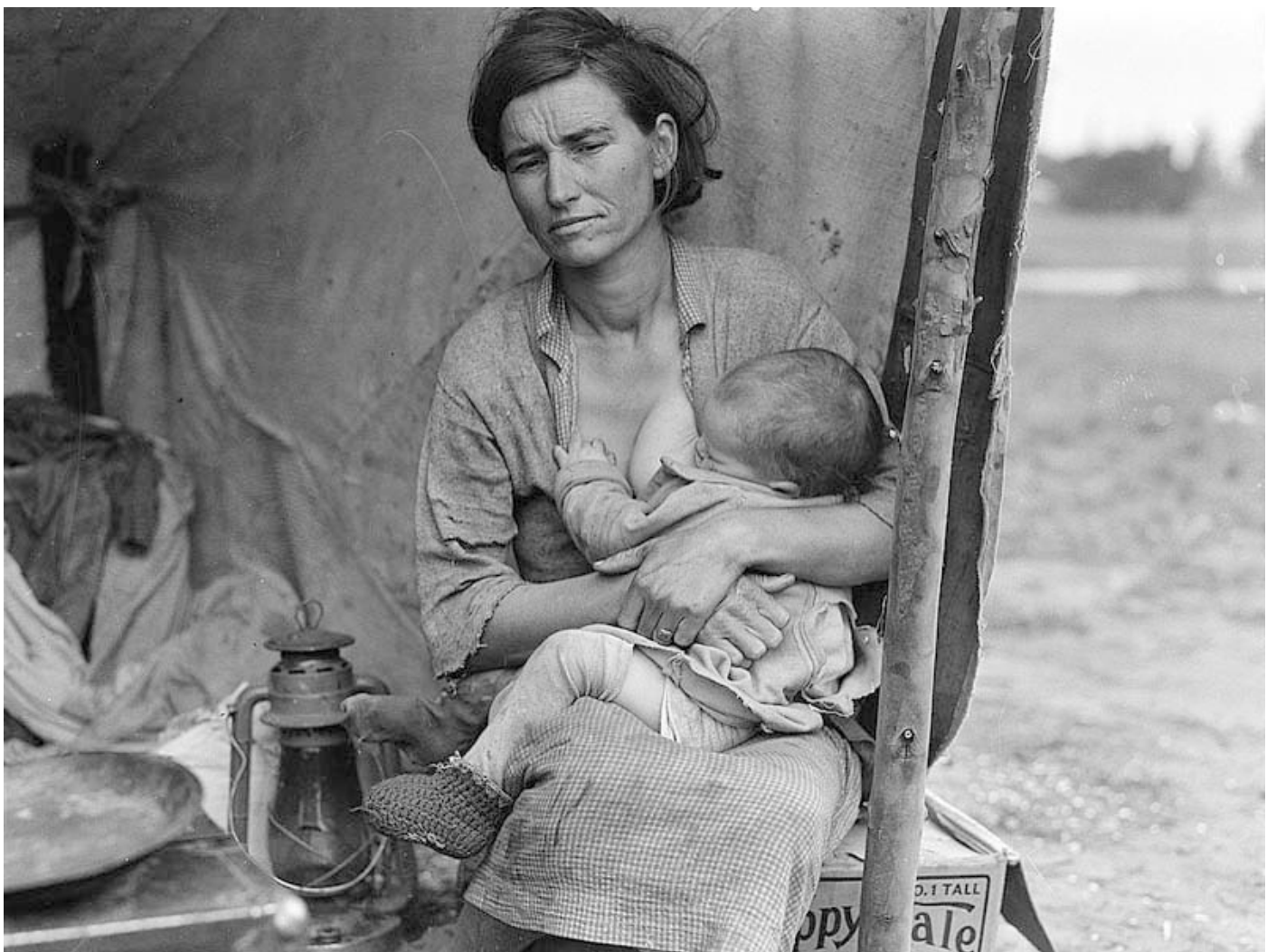


² <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/migrant-mother-dorothea-lange-truth-photography/>









Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Describe what each separate image shows. How are they alike? How are they different?
- How do you read the images of the family looking directly into the camera versus the ones where they are looking beyond the camera?
- Why do you think that Dorothea Lange and her boss Roy Stryker chose the tightly-framed image of the woman and not one of the other five images to reproduce and distribute?
- Do the other frames suggest the same narrative as *Migrant Mother* does on its own?
- Does your understanding of the moment change with more information?
- Do you consider this image to be strict documentation, or do you believe that Lange composed the image to tell a story?
- Why do you think *Migrant Mother* is now one of the most published photographs in history? What makes it still relevant to viewers?
- Lange did not write down the names of the people in the photograph. Nearly 40 years later, the mother was identified as Florence Owens Thompson, a member of the Cherokee Nation, who had migrated to California from Oklahoma. Thompson later stated that the family had not sold their tires to buy food.³ Does knowing this information change the impact of the photograph? What responsibility does the photographer have to the people they photograph in a documentary context?
- Why do you think this image became so famous or iconic over time, over another one of Lange's images, *Child in Pea Picker's Camp Near Stockton, California* (seen below)?

³ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/migrant-mother-dorothea-lange-truth-photography/>
Link for the information provided in the restructuring of the second paragraph



Dorothea Lange, *Child in Pea Picker's Camp Near Stockton, California*, 1936

Activity: Plan a Documentary Project

Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s and early 1940s used photography to record and respond to great issues of their time such as joblessness, homelessness, and natural and man-made disasters. Divide students into groups and have each group discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the major political and humanitarian issues of our time?
- What are some issues of concern at your school or in your neighborhood?
- If you were to select one of these issues to document through photography, what would you photograph? Why?
- What places, people, or details would you show to tell the story?
- How would you make those pictures?

Have members of each group share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Discussion on Migrations: What would you take?

Many of the families impacted by the Dustbowl left their homes quickly, taking with them only the few belongings they could fit in their car and then embarked on long journeys often not knowing where they might end up and what they might do for work, food, and shelter. They felt pushed away from their homes by poor living conditions and pulled toward lands where they heard there might be more opportunity. Work and resources were scarce everywhere during this time and the “migrants” were not often wanted or welcome in the places they moved to. Imagine you must leave your home, possibly forever, and you can only bring what you can fit in your backpack.

- What would you pack? Why?
- What would you want to take? What would you need to take?
- What might you have to leave behind that would be difficult?
- What might you think about and how would you feel as you made these decisions?
- Write and draw about what you would take or draw the contents of your bag.

Discussion on Migrations: Push and Pull Factors

Ask students to do additional reading from the below resource list or have a class discussion on the causes and effects of the Dust Bowl, then discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the factors that pushed Dust Bowl migrants to flee their homes and migrate elsewhere?
- What challenges did they encounter on this journey and once they reached their destinations?
- Can you think of examples from recent history or that you have studied in school in which groups migrate to a new location?
- What push and pull factors contributed to their migration?
- What can you learn from what they experienced in a new home?
- What kind of opportunities do you think were available to them, personally and vocationally?
- Do you think they were accepted, or did they experience tensions in the communities they joined?



Dorothea Lange, *Toward Los Angeles, California*, 1936



Dorothea Lange, *Texas Farmers in California, Marysville Migrant Camp (R.A.)*, August 1935

Extended Resources on Dorothea Lange, the Depression, and the Dust Bowl

High-resolution images:

[Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California, 1936](#)

Note: rights to these images are held by the Library of Congress and the public has free and open access to using these images.

Works in Fiction:

Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.

Janke, Katelan. *Dear America Survival in the Storm: The Dust Bowl Diary of Grace Edwards*. New York: Scholastic, 2002. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking Press, 1939.

Works in Non-Fiction:

[Dorothea Lange's caption for the image that came to be known as *Migrant Mother*:](#)

"Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute."

[Library of Congress- AMERICAN MEMORY DUST BOWL HOME PAGE](#)

Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) Dorothea Lange Collection

Partridge, Elizabeth. *Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange*. New York: Puffin, Penguin Group USA, 2001

Nardo, Don. *Migrant Mother: How a Photograph defined the Great Depression*. North Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2011.

Sandler, Martin W. *The Dust Bowl Through the Lens: How Photography Revealed and Helped Remedy a National Disaster*. New York: Walker & Co, 2009

Guiberson, Brenda Z. *Disasters: Natural and Man-Made Catastrophes through the Centuries*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2010.

Stanley, Jerry. *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*, New York: Crown, 1992.

Works in Video:

[PBS and Ken Burns: The Dust Bowl Video Clips](#)

Maps:

[This map outlines the states considered to be Dust Bowl states and the states damaged by the storms.](#)

[FSA Photographs Organized by Region and Photographer](#)

[Dust Bowl Timeline](#) (National Drought Mitigation Center)

Audio Files:

[Article / Interview with Daughter of Florence Owens Thompson](#)

[There are more than 200 interviews of Dust Bowl refugees in audio file form, available from the Library of Congress.](#)

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.7

Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.2

Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.6

Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9

Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7

Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 5 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1.C

Pose and respond to specific questions by making comments that contribute to the discussion and elaborate on the remarks of others.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1.D

Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.2

Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1.C

Pose questions that elicit elaboration and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant observations and ideas that bring the discussion back on topic as needed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1.D

Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, modify their own views.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.2

Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1.C

Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections considering the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

SS.9-12.IS.1. Create actionable, student-driven (or student-informed) questions that lead to social studies investigations beyond one's immediate cultural environment or lens.

SS.9-12.IS.6. Analyze evidence and identify counter perspectives to revise or strengthen claims.

SS.5.G.4. Analyze the effects of catastrophic environmental and technological events on human settlements and migration.

SS.6-8.G.4. Explain how humans and their environment affect one another.

SS.6-8.G.7. Explain how environmental characteristics affect human migration and settlement.

SS.9-12.G.12. Evaluate how short- and long-term climate variability affects human migration and settlement patterns, use of land and resources, and relationship with the land.

SS.6-8.H.4.MC. Organize and critique applicable evidence to develop a coherent argument about the past.

SS.9-12.H.13. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

VA:Cr.2.2.II - a. Demonstrate awareness of ethical implications of making and distributing creative work.

VA:Re7.1.5 - a. Compare one's own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others.

VA:Re7.1.I - a. Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

VA:Re7.2.I - a. Analyze how one's understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.

VA:Re8.1.5 - a. Interpret art through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

VA:Re8.1.6 - a. Collaboratively interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

VA:Re8.1.7 - a. Interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information and identify key concepts.

VA:Re8.1.8 - a. Collaboratively develop meaningful interpretations, supported by evidence, of artworks through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, contextual information, and key concepts.

VA:Re8.1.I - a. Construct meaningful interpretations, supported by evidence, of an artwork or collection of works through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, contextual information, and key concepts.

VA:Re9.2.6 - a. Develop and apply relevant criteria to evaluate a work of art.

VA:Cn11.1.5 - a. Identify how art is used to inform or change beliefs, values, or behaviors of an individual or society.

VA:Cn11.1.7 - a. Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

VA:Cn11.1.8 - a. Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

