

## Dust Bowl in Images: Storytelling in Pictures

**Objective:** Students will learn conditions of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression and will consider storytelling and persuasion in images.

**Motivation:** Have students examine the photograph “Migrant Mother” and listen to the History Explorer podcast [Investigating Portraiture](http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/SPGuide.pdf) [<http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/SPGuide.pdf>], with specific emphasis on “Migrant Mother” (beginning 05:30). Ask students to consider what story this tells about the Great Depression.

Explain that the photograph was taken by Dorothea Lange while working for the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency. Ask students: Why might this have been a useful photograph for the Roosevelt administration’s goals? Have students examine the [other photographs in this series](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html) [[http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128\\_migm.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html)], available through the Library of Congress. Ask: What do you think made “Migrant Mother” stand out? If you have completed the Dust Bowl in Text: Persuasive Rhetoric in the Dust Bowl Story activity, consider what persuasive elements are included in the image. What message is it sending, and how does it achieve that goal? To extend the discussion, consider the story that is told in the photograph of William Casby. What is the message and how is it sent? What elements are included?

**Procedure:** Have students examine Arthur Rothstein’s image “Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.” Discuss what elements, if any, tell a story or attempt to persuade the viewer of a perspective. Does it offer an argument for the cause of the Dust Bowl? Does it elicit an emotional response? If so, what and to what end? Explain that these images were collected by the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA--the RA became the FSA in 1937), government agencies created by the New Deal. What story do you think these agencies would want to tell about the Dust Bowl specifically or the Great Depression at large? Does it offer an argument in favor of the agencies’ work? Read the related excerpt from the oral history interview with Arthur Rothstein from the Archives of American Art and discuss his responses. Ask students to explain what they perceive his goals to be based on his explanation of the project, and why he thinks this photograph was so powerful to viewers.

Next, ask students to examine Rothstein’s additional images from the National Museum of American History’s collection. Have them compare and contrast their selected image to the iconic image—what is included in this image and what is the emotional response it creates? What story is it trying to tell about the Dust Bowl? Why might this not have been reproduced as frequently Rothstein’s iconic image?



**Summary:** Brainstorm local environmental and social issues in your area. Have students select an issue and ask them to photograph it with special attention to telling a story through the image. Remind students of the persuasive elements they discovered in the Dust Bowl images and to consider Rothstein’s argument that the power of his image comes from the personal story it tells, and the relationship it shows between the farmer and the land. Create a slideshow of student images and invite the class to discuss what aspect of the issue the photograph illuminates and why.

**Extension Activities:**

- Examine Rothstein’s famous image of a skull on the cracked earth, and read his description of the reaction. Compare this with historical newspaper accounts of the issue, available from [The Lewiston Daily Sun](#) and [The New London Day](#). Use the [Argument, Persuasion, or Propaganda](#) [[http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson829/Argument-Propaganda.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson829/Argument-Propaganda.pdf)] outline from ReadWriteThink to discuss the image – does it offer an argument, is it designed to be persuasive, or is it propaganda? Do you accept Rothstein’s explanation? Why or why not?
- To provide context for the Farm Security Administration’s goals, have students view the film [The Plow That Broke the Plains](#) [<http://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.13595.dup>] to determine the argument the FSA made about the causes of the Dust Bowl. Have students rate the film according to the Argument, Persuasion, or Propaganda outline offered above.



*Oral history interview with Arthur Rothstein, 1964 May 25,*  
*Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

[<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-arthur-rothstein-13317>]

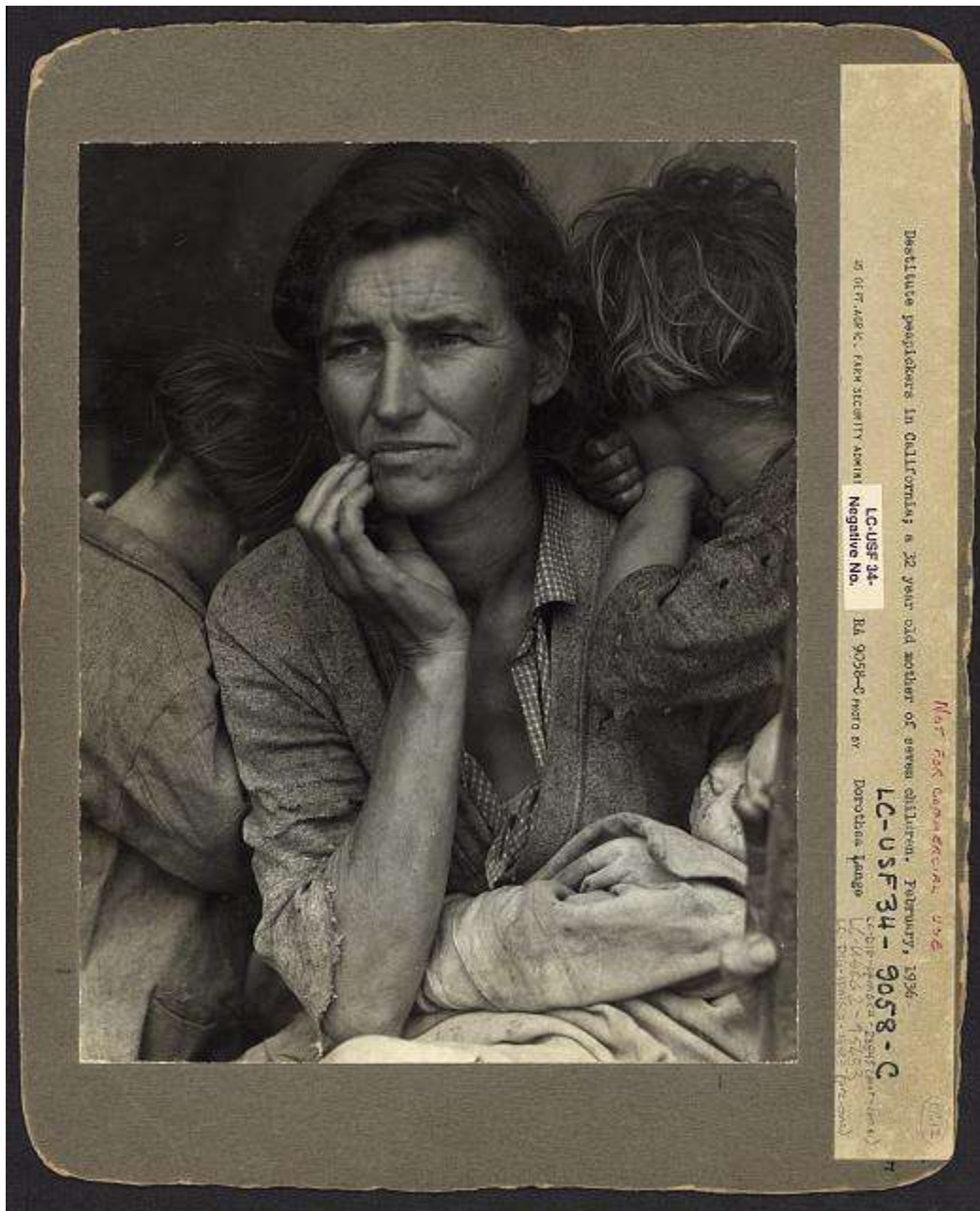
Dust Storm in Cimarron County

I met Roy Stryker and Rex Tugwell and they had a very interesting photographic project that they wanted me to operate for them-a project involving the pictorial history of American agriculture. ... When Roy got to Washington he decided that the best way to show the accomplishments of the Resettlement Administration would be through visual means...Roy was a firm believer in the power of pictures and that the best way to record something and explain something was through the use of photographs.

...This was an assignment that had been given to me by Roy-to go to the Dust Bowl, to Oklahoma, Kansas, to Texas, to those area that were being devastated by drought, that were suffering from wind erosion... I lived in the Dust Bowl for several months and went out every day and took pictures. In the process, one day, wandering around through Cimarron County in Oklahoma, which is in the panhandle of Oklahoma, I photographed this farm and the people who lived on the farm. The farmer and his two children, two little boys, were walking past a shed on their property and I took this photograph with the dust swirling all around them. I had no idea at the time that it was going to become a famous photograph, but it looked like a good picture to me and I took it. And I took a number of other pictures on the same property. And then I went on to some other farms and took those pictures. This particular picture turned out to be the picture that was quite famous. It was a picture that had a very simple kind of composition, but there was something about the swirling dust and the shed behind the farmer. What it did was the kind of thing Roy always talked about-it showed an individual in relation to his environment...

... Well, when my picture of the dust storm was printed widely, over and over and over again, it made people realize that here was a tragedy that was affecting people-it wasn't just affecting crops, but it was affecting people-the relationships between the dust storms and the migrations of people out of this part of the United States and the way it was affecting them individually. This photograph had a great deal of influence on people in the East, for example, who had no contact and no sense of identity with this poor farmer walking across the dusty soil on his farm in Oklahoma-it gave him a sense of identity. And it helped me put a lot of these soil-conservation practices in, and provide legislation for soil conservation to remedy these conditions...In the beginning, it was a record; after that it became a news picture, it then became a feature photograph, eventually it became a historical photograph, and now it's considered a work of art in most museums. It's a picture that went through a kind of evolutionary process all by itself. It has a life of its own.





"Migrant Mother," photograph by Dorothea Lange, Nipomo, California, February, 1936.  
Library of Congress and National Museum of American History collections



Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Arthur Rothstein, photographer, April, 1936.  
Library of Congress and National Museum of American History collections

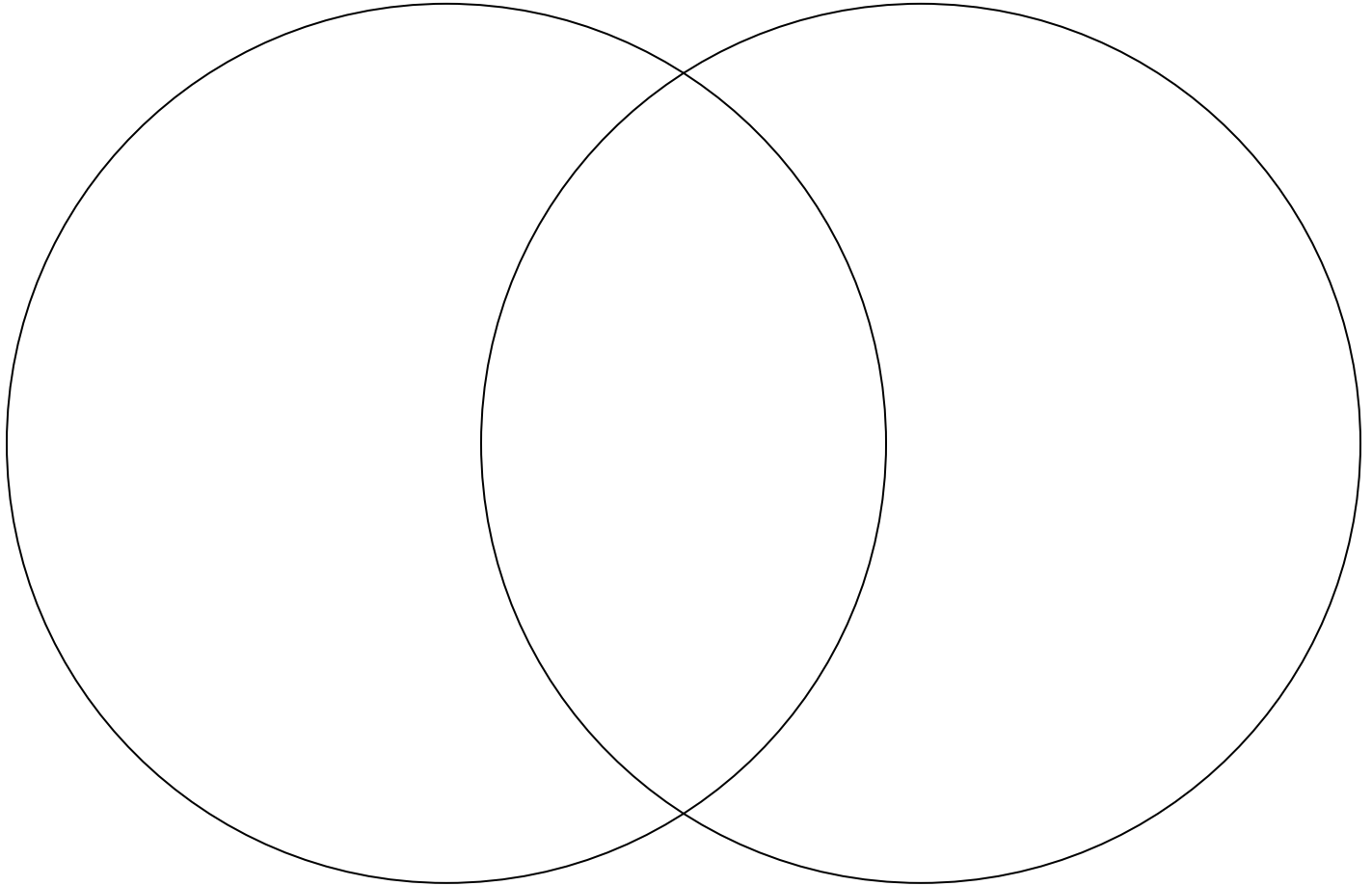


## Dust Bowl Image Analysis

Select an image by Arthur Rothstein and compare and contrast it to the image “Dust Storm, Cimarron County.” What is included in this image and what is the emotional response it creates? What story is it trying to tell about the Dust Bowl?

Dust Storm, Cimarron County

Image Title: \_\_\_\_\_



Record additional notes and responses to your selected image below. What makes it especially effective or ineffective for telling the story of the Dust Bowl?

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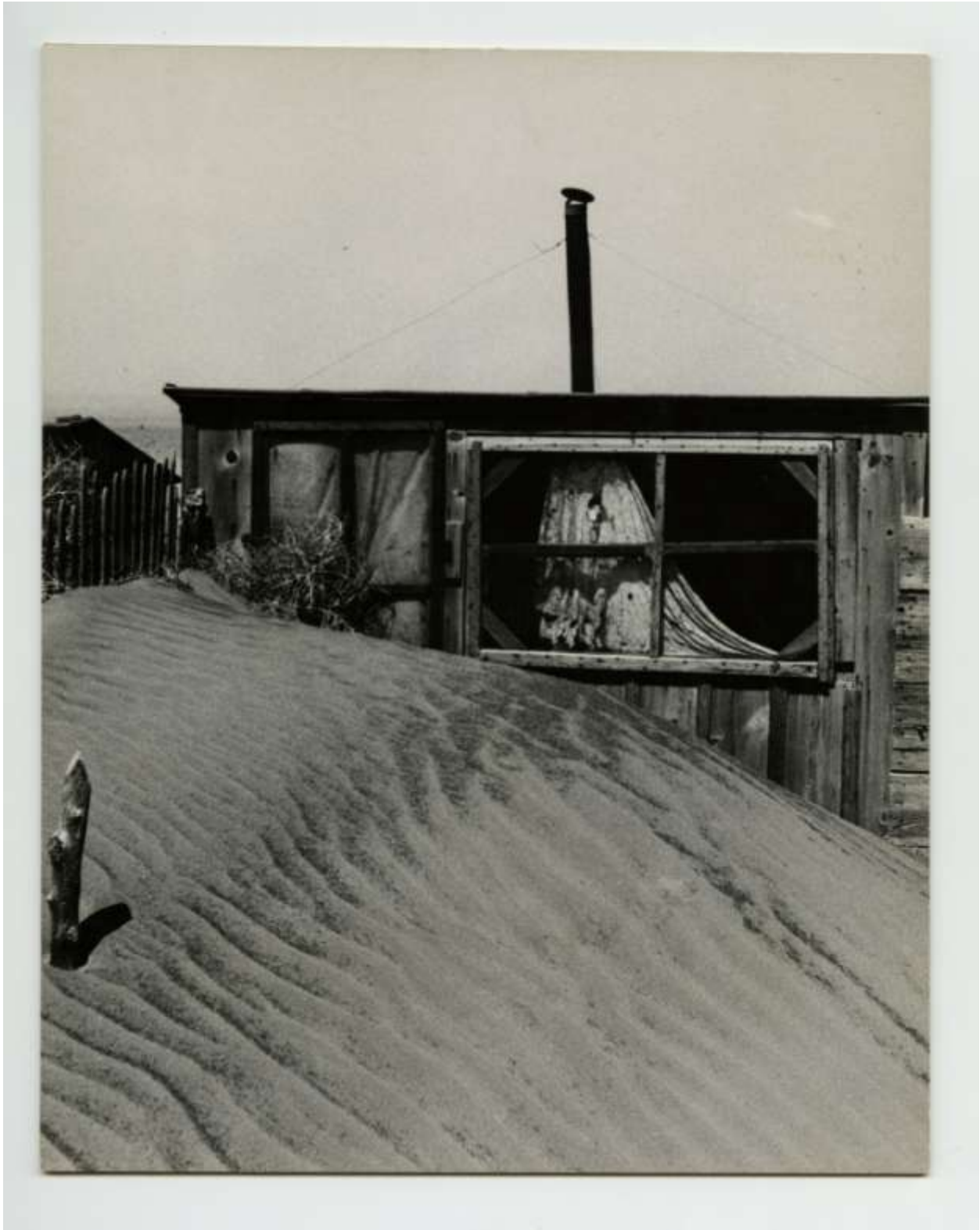
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Corn Damage Caused by Drought. Arthur Rothstein, photographer.  
National Museum of American History Photography Collection





Dust Storm Damage, Oklahoma. Arthur Rothstein, photographer.  
National Museum of American History collection







Darrell Coble, 3 Years Old, Dust Storm Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Arthur Rothstein, photographer.  
National Museum of American History collection



Extension:



The bleached skull of a steer on the dry sun-baked earth of the South Dakota badlands.  
Arthur Rothstein, photographer.  
[Library of Congress](#) collection

*Oral history interview with Arthur Rothstein, 1964 May 25,*  
*Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

[<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-arthur-rothstein-13317>]

Skull Image Controversy

... I found myself in South Dakota on cracked earth where there was a skull, and I made a lot of photographic exercises using the skull-the texture of the skull, the texture of the earth, the cracks in the soil, the lighting, how the lighting changed from the east to the west as the sun went down. I spent a good part of the day taking pictures of it, near a piece of cactus, on grass-you know-and experimenting with it. I sent all these pictures in to Washington...Unknown to me, and perhaps even unknown to Roy, this picture editor, Max Hill with Associated Press...extracted the photograph. Since he knew nothing about the West, to him this was a symbol of the drought. The fact is that it had been made in May and the fact that these arroyos are to be found even to this day in any part of the West, and the fact that you can find skulls of steers and cows and jackrabbits and rabbits, and so forth, all over the plains meant nothing to him. He just liked this picture probably because I lavished so much photographic artistry on it, you see. And so he sent it out as an example of the drought. This was months later, months after I'd made the picture. The drought was becoming serious around June and July. Well, there, too, nothing would have happened probably if the editor of the Fargo Forum had not picked up this picture, serviced by the Associated Press, Fargo Forum was a member of the Associated Press, and said, "Now this is a real example of fakery." As far as he was concerned, it was a fake photograph. He didn't know that I had made the picture in May and that the picture had a caption on it that I hadn't contributed, that it was sent out by the Associated Press, not by the government! He didn't know any of these things. As far as he was concerned, here was a government picture that was a fake. Propaganda. And of course the Forum was, like most newspapers of the time, opposed to the Democratic Party and to the New Deal. He wrote a big front-page editorial, just as Roosevelt was coming through Bismarck, North Dakota, and printed a special edition of the Fargo Forum with this picture on the front page and called it a fake-New Deal Propaganda-there was a lot of talk about that in those days-and put this on the train for all the correspondents to read. It just happened that I was in Bismarck, North Dakota, at the time this came through. One of the correspondents asked me if I had made this picture and I agreed that I had. So he immediately sent a message back to Washington and got somebody to start digging through the files. They found a lot of other pictures that I had made, and this of course became a great joke. Cartoonists drew pictures of me wandering all over the United States with a skull, planting it here and planting it there, but the fact is that this was the farthest thing from my mind. I had not taken the picture in the first place as an example of New Deal propaganda; I had taken a picture of something that existed, and may even exist today. I had not taken the picture with the idea of it being used as a symbol of the drought, although it did show the drought, I mean it was dried earth and a skull.

