

Dust Bowl in Text:

Persuasive Rhetoric in the Dust Bowl Story

Objective: Students will understand examples of persuasive language and will learn about conditions in the Dust Bowl region in the mid-1930s by examining a speech by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a letter written by farmer Caroline Henderson.

Procedure: Introduce persuasive language using the outline included in the lesson. Provide students with both of the primary sources and related organizers. Discuss the use of persuasive language in each.

Summary: Have students write an imaginary letter on the model of the letter by Caroline Henderson from a farmer in the Dust Bowl to a politician or national audience of their choosing describing the conditions during the Dust Bowl and calling for attention to or action on the problem, incorporating each kind of appeal.

Or, brainstorm contemporary local environmental or social issues that concern students. Have students write a letter to a politician or a speech on the model of Roosevelt's "fireside chat" that discusses or calls for action on the issue, incorporating each kind of appeal.

Extension Activities:

Have students complete the [Dust Bowl Days](http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/dust-bowl-days) [http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/dust-bowl-days] lesson from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which introduces students to the conditions of the Dust Bowl and the efforts of the government and average citizens to respond to the crisis.

Gather information on the Dust Bowl from primary sources and historians in [this interactive](http://interactives.mped.org/view_interactive.aspx?id=729&title=) [http://interactives.mped.org/view_interactive.aspx?id=729&title=] from ReadWriteThink.

Help students consider the reasons for the Dust Bowl and historians' interpretations of the event by selecting a historical literacy activity in chapter 6, "Dust to Eat, and Dust to Drink, and Dust to Breathe," pages 84-104 in *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School Classrooms*, Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Santo. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.



Persuasive Rhetoric

Persuasive language is designed to influence the way you think. Persuasive rhetoric is the art of using language to argue effectively for or against a set of beliefs or course of action, and to convince others to adopt a position or act in a certain way. Typically, a speaker or writer uses three types of appeals to present an argument:

Ethos/Ethical Appeals: Ethos is an appeal based on generally accepted morals or ethics. Ethos relies on the desire to do the “right” thing.

Logos/Logical Appeals: Logos is an appeal based on facts or logic. Statistics, demographics, or scientific fact are all elements of logos.

Pathos/Emotional Appeals: Pathos is an appeal based on emotion. Appeals to pathos rely solely on emotional response to strong ideas. Emotional appeals are messages designed to persuade an audience by creating strong feelings rather than by providing facts and evidence. Emotional appeals include:

- appeal to **fear**, which taps into people’s fear of losing their safety or security
- appeal to **pity**, which takes advantage of people’s sympathy and compassion for others
- appeal to **vanity**, which relies on people’s desire to feel good about themselves

Key Words

As you read the passages and respond to the questions, you will need to know the definitions of the following words:

- **Anecdote:** An illustrative story, often derived from personal experience
- **Argument:** An attempt to persuade someone of something by giving reasons and examples
- **Author’s Purpose:** The goal of a piece of writing. Typical purposes may be to inform, to entertain, to persuade, or to engage emotionally.
- **Counterargument:** An argument in opposition of another argument
- **Credibility:** The ability to be trusted. Often, an author’s credibility relies on experience or credentials.
- **Imagery:** Visually descriptive or figurative language
- **Loaded Language:** Language with strong emotional connotations. Loaded language attempts to persuade the listener by appealing to his or her emotions.
- **Mood:** The emotional response of the reader or listener. Often, the author’s tone influences the mood of the piece.
- **Rhetorical Appeal:** A persuasive strategy
- **Tone:** The attitude of the author or speaker



Primary Source Evaluation

You are about to read two primary source texts. As you read both selections, pay close attention to rhetorical devices, point of view, key words, and stylistic elements.

Caroline Henderson's letters were published in *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1931 to 1937. Although the format of her writing suggests personal correspondence, Henderson wrote her letters with the national audience of the publication in mind. Published in May 1936, these letters offered readers unique insight into the conditions of the Dust Bowl. Direct students to the *Atlantic* site and to the sections indicated below.

Selection 1

Caroline Henderson: "Letters from the Dust Bowl"

The Atlantic Monthly

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1936/05/letters-from-the-dust-bowl/8897/>

When drought struck Oklahoma in the 1930s, the author and her husband stayed behind to protect their 28-year-old farm. Her letters to a friend paint a picture of dire poverty, desiccated soil, and long days with no sunshine.

Editor's Note: For 28 years, Mrs. Caroline A. Henderson and her husband have been farming in Oklahoma. For the past five years, her household has been one of many that have fought as best they might the devastating effects, first of the unprecedented drought, and then of the resulting dust storms. Her letters, written to a friend in Maryland, open a vivid and pathetic chapter of American agriculture.

March 8, 1936

DEAR EVELYN: —

"Since I wrote to you..." to "The combination of fresh paint with a real dust storm is not pleasing to contemplate..."

Consider this passage. Highlight specific words that contribute to the tone of the first paragraph. Look for vivid imagery or description, as well as illustrative adjectives. Below, list some examples of tone words that describe Henderson's writing.

"...My own verdict in regard to plans for the reclaiming of such land would be, 'Too late.'" to "The two extremes I have just suggested...are indicative of the two conflicting tendencies now

How would you describe Henderson's attitude toward the land? Why does she believe it may be "too late" to reclaim it?



evident through an extensive section of the high plains.”

“On the one hand we note a disposition to recognize a mistake...” to “On the other hand we observe that many seem determined to use even the hard experiences of the past...as warning signals”

What type of argument (emotional, ethical, or logical) does she use to support this claim? What specific evidence does she use to prove her point?

“This impressionistic account of conditions here and of our hope for the future would scarcely be complete without some mention of government assistance...” to “People here can't quite believe yet in a hopeless climatic change which would deprive them permanently of the gracious gift of rain...”

What does this selection tell you about Henderson’s attitude toward the Rehabilitation Service?

Why do you think that many people affected by the Dust Bowl remained optimistic? What does Henderson mean when she writes that “there is something of a gambler in all of us”?

March 13, 1936

“We must try to get this mailed tomorrow...” to “Who shall say?”

What does this selection tell you about Henderson’s attitude toward the Rehabilitation Service?

Why do you think that many people affected by the Dust Bowl remained optimistic? What does Henderson mean when she writes that “there is something of a gambler in all of us”?

1. Draw Conclusions -Using specific details from her letter, describe Henderson’s view of the following:

- Government aid:
- Preservation of the environment:



2. **Personal Connection** - How did you feel when you read her letter? If you received a similar letter from a friend, how might you respond? Is there a comparable environmental disaster that has occurred in your lifetime? Explain:

3. **Analyze Author's Purpose** - Does Henderson offer a clear conclusion or strong opinion about the issues at hand?

4. **Analyze Ethical Appeals** - How does Henderson use an appeal to ethics or morals to describe her predicament?

5. **Analyze Emotional Appeals** - Loaded language, or words with strong emotional associations, can be used to influence an audience's attitude. What examples of loaded language do you see in Henderson's piece?



Primary Source Evaluation

Selection 2

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "On Drought Conditions"

<http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/090636.html>

September 6, 1936

"I have been on a journey of husbandry. I went primarily to see at first hand conditions in the drought states; to see how effectively Federal and local authorities are taking care of pressing problems of relief and also how they are to work together to defend the people of this country against the effects of future droughts.

Husbandry is defined as "the management and conservation of resources." Why does FDR describe his journey this way?



Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Fireside Chat" microphone

I saw drought devastation in nine states. I talked with families who had lost their wheat crop, lost their corn crop, lost their livestock, lost the water in their well, lost their garden and come through to the end of the summer without one dollar of cash resources, facing a winter without feed or food -- facing a planting season without seed to put in the ground.

Consider FDR's credibility as president. Why might citizens be particularly influenced by his message? Why was it important that he actually visit the "drought states"? How might his credibility have been different had he not made this journey?

That was the extreme case, but there are thousands and thousands of families on western farms who share the same difficulties.

I saw cattlemen who because of lack of grass or lack of winter feed have been compelled to sell all but their breeding stock and will need help to carry even these through the coming winter. I saw livestock kept alive only because water had been brought to them long distances in tank cars. I saw other farm families who have not lost everything but who, because they have made only partial crops, must have some form of help if they are to continue farming next spring. I shall never forget the fields of wheat so blasted by heat that they

Highlight examples of ethical or emotional appeal in the passage to the left. How does Roosevelt use these in his speech? Why does he choose to use these specific appeals? How effective are his choices?



cannot be harvested. I shall never forget field after field of corn stunted, earless and stripped of leaves, for what the sun left the grasshoppers took. I saw brown pastures which would not keep a cow on fifty acres.

Yet I would not have you think for a single minute that there is permanent disaster in these drought regions, or that the picture I saw meant depopulating these areas. No cracked earth, no blistering sun, no burning wind, no grasshoppers, are a permanent match for the indomitable American farmers and stockmen and their wives and children who have carried on through desperate days, and inspire us with their self-reliance, their tenacity and their courage. It was their fathers' task to make homes; it is their task to keep those homes; it is our task to help them with their fight...

How is FDR's observation similar to Henderson's? Do you think he views the people affected by the Dust Bowl in the same manner in which they see themselves?

...Spending like this is not waste. It would spell future waste if we did not spend for such things now. These emergency work projects provide money to buy food and clothing for the winter; they keep the livestock on the farm; they provide seed for a new crop, and, best of all, they will conserve soil and water in the future in those areas most frequently hit by drought.

Think carefully about FDR's earlier use of the word husbandry. How does this passage reflect his sense of responsibility for those affected by the Dust Bowl?

If, for example, in some local area the water table continues to drop and the topsoil to blow away, the land values will disappear with the water and the soil. People on the farms will drift into the nearby cities; the cities will have no farm trade and the workers in the city factories and stores will have no jobs. Property values in the cities will decline. If, on the other hand, the farms within that area remain as farms with better water supply and no erosion, the farm population will stay on the land and prosper and the nearby cities will prosper too. Property values will increase instead of disappearing. That is why it is worth our while as a nation to spend money in order to save money.



In the drought area people are not afraid to use new methods to meet changes in Nature, and to correct mistakes of the past. If overgrazing has injured range lands, they are willing to reduce the grazing. If certain wheat lands should be returned to pasture they are willing to cooperate. If trees should be planted as windbreaks or to stop erosion they will work with us. If terracing or summer fallowing or crop rotation is called for, they will carry them out. They stand ready to fit, and not to fight, the ways of Nature.

We are helping, and shall continue to help the farmer to do those things, through local soil conservation committees and other cooperative local, state and federal agencies of government...With this fine help we are tiding over the present emergency. We are going to conserve soil, conserve water and conserve life. We are going to have long-time defenses against both low prices and drought. We are going to have a farm policy that will serve the national welfare. That is our hope for the future...

There are those who fail to read both the signs of the times and American history. They would try to refuse the worker any effective power to bargain collectively, to earn a decent livelihood and to acquire security. It is those short-sighted ones, not labor, who threaten this country with that class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life.

All American workers, brain workers and manual workers alike, and all the rest of us whose well-being depends on theirs, know that our needs are one in building an orderly economic democracy in which all can profit and in which all can be secure from the kind of faulty economic direction which brought us to the brink of common ruin seven years ago.

What is the rhetorical purpose of characterizing the farmers affected by the Dust Bowl as unafraid to “use new methods or meet changes in Nature, and to correct mistakes of the past”?

What do you think the “signs of the times” are? How, according to FDR, might society be changing?

Do you think a divide existed between “brain workers” and “manual workers”? Does such a divide exist today? Why or why not?

Why do you think FDR was so adamantly opposed to class consciousness?



There is no cleavage between white collar workers and manual workers, between artists and artisans, musicians and mechanics, lawyers and accountants and architects and miners.

What did economic freedom mean for Americans? How might economic freedom give way to political freedom?

Tomorrow, Labor Day, belongs to all of us. Tomorrow, Labor Day, symbolizes the hope of all Americans. Anyone who calls it a class holiday challenges the whole concept of American democracy.

The Fourth of July commemorates our political freedom -- a freedom which without economic freedom is meaningless indeed. Labor Day symbolizes our determination to achieve an economic freedom for the average man which will give his political freedom reality."

6. **Draw Conclusions**—Using specific details from his address, describe Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s view of the following:

- Government’s responsibility to its people:
- The perseverance of community:
- Preservation of the environment:
- Class consciousness:

7. **Personal Connection** -If you were affected by the “drought conditions” and listened to FDR’s “Fireside Chat,” how might you feel about the president’s outlook on the disaster? Would you trust him and his plan of action? Explain.



8. **Analyze Author's Purpose** -Does Roosevelt offer a clear conclusion or strong opinion about the issues at hand? Why would he have delivered this address?

9. **Analyze Ethical Appeals** - How does Roosevelt use an appeal to morals or ethics in his speech? What is his responsibility to his people? Why do you believe this is so?

10. **Analyze Emotional Appeals** -Loaded language, or words with strong emotional associations, can be used to influence an audience's attitude. What examples of loaded language do you see in Roosevelt's speech?

11. **Analyze Logical Appeals**—Roosevelt uses many examples of logical appeals in his address. List some of these and justify how they contribute to his argument.

12. **Quickwrite** — Roosevelt's address was delivered six months after Henderson wrote her letter. How do you think Caroline Henderson would have responded to President Roosevelt's speech? Would she have been comforted or frustrated? How might she have felt about his characterization of those affected by the Dust Bowl?



13. **Compare and Contrast** — In the table below, compare and contrast the points of view of “On Drought Conditions” and “Letters from the Dust Bowl.”

Speaker	Caroline Henderson	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
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Occasion

Audience

Purpose

Subject

Tone

Theme

Diction

Syntax

