

**A Teacher's Guide to  
The Depression and New Deal:  
A History in Documents**

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# A Teacher's Guide to The Depression and New Deal: A History in Documents

by Robert S. McElvaine

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## INTRODUCTION

President Herbert Hoover proclaimed in his 1929 inaugural speech, "I have no fears for the future of our country. It is bright with hope." A superficial look at the U.S. economy during the 1920s seems to confirm his belief: profits, stock values, and consumer spending had climbed throughout the decade. However, by 1927 growth had slowed as consumption fell behind the rapidly growing supply of goods coming off mass production assembly lines. An extraordinary degree of buying on credit hid the imbalance between productivity and purchasing power, and greed fueled speculation in the stock market. As a result, many businesses reinvested profits, expanding production instead of cutting prices or increasing wages. Hoover had observed the warning signals and early in his administration urged the Federal Reserve Board to discourage speculation. This effort to forestall collapse, however, proved to be too little, too late. Within six months of Hoover's inauguration, the Great Bull Market crashed, ushering in the worst economic disaster in our history. Hoover's inadequate response to the crisis left Americans disillusioned with both his administration and the free market. In 1932, they elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the pragmatic and optimistic governor of New York, to replace him. FDR launched his New Deal, an unprecedented attempt by the federal government to relieve suffering and regulate the economy. The following lessons help students analyze this complex chapter in our history.

## SAMPLE LESSONS

### LESSON 1. UNDERSTANDING THE MAIN IDEA

**Objective:** Poems and songs can help students grasp the human face of the Great Depression. In this exercise, students will summarize poems and songs, and assess the documents as they discuss issues raised by the selections. Students will develop skills in finding the main idea of these primary sources, as well as in oral communication. Ideally, each student will participate in civil discourse and will engage in critical thinking.

Selection: Poems and songs throughout the text.

Category	Pg.	Title	Author	Date
Zeitgeist	16	"Blue Skies"	Irving Berlin	1927
	36	"Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"	E.Y. Harburg	1932
	27	"Stormy Weather"	Ted Koehler	1933
New Deal	179	"Over the Rainbow"	E.Y. Harburg	1939
	51	"The NRA Prosperity March"		
	54	"CWA Blues"	Joe Pulliam	1934
Labor troubles	56	"WPA"	Jesse Stone	1938
	70	"Which Side Are You On?"	Florence Reece	1934
	74	"Sit Down"	Maurice Sugarman	1936 -37?
Racial/ethnic issues	84	"I Have Seen Black Hands"	Richard Wright	1934
	88	Poem: "Ballad of Roosevelt"	Langston Hughes	1934
	115	"Let America Be America Again"	Langston Hughes	1938

Category	Pg.	Title	Author	Date
	122	"El Enganchado (The Hooked One)"		
Okies and Farmers	135	Song: "Goin' Down This Road (I Ain't Going to Be Treated This Way)"	Woody Guthrie	
	136	"Hungry, Hungry Are We"	John L. Handcox	
	137	"So Long, It's Been Good To Know Yuh (Dusty Old Dust)"	Woody Guthrie	

**Preparation:** Students develop a summary card (3" x 5" index card) for each selection to be included in the seminar discussion. (The teacher should spot check these cards a day or two prior to the scheduled discussion.)

Author side:

- Author's full name and brief biographical/identification: Use the introduction to the selection and other resources as appropriate.
- Knowledge about the authors will improve students' understanding of the documents.

Document side:

- Selection title, date published, page number from *The Depression and New Deal*.
- Analysis of the document including the following as appropriate: summary of main ideas, purpose of document, noteworthy quotes, intended audience, main themes addressed, effects/feelings evoked.
- Sketch or visual/symbolic representation of the document.
- Connections/comparisons between this selection and other documents or facts about the time period

*Discussion day:* Divide the class into two equal groups and have them arrange desks in two concentric circles. The inner circle will serve as the discussion panel, asking questions and responding to one another through extension, elaboration, and application of issues presented in the documents. The outer circle will listen, take notes, and guide the discussion by asking open-ended questions.

While the outer circle members should encourage participation, especially of reticent members of the inner circle, they do not interact in the discussion; they just ask questions. Halfway through class time, have inner and outer circle students trade places. The teacher's role is to observe, evaluate, and pose a new topic as necessary. Grading of the activity should be based on students' frequency and quality of responses, factual support for their ideas, and specific examples from the documents. Negative behavior, hogging the discussion, and lack of preparation should result in lower grades.

## LESSON 2. SEQUENCING AND SYMBOLISM: ILLUSTRATED TIMELINE

**Objective:** Students do not always take the time to think about what they can learn from studying pictures. This lesson will help students appreciate the significance of photos, cartoons, advertisements, and other visual images as primary documents. Furthermore, much like Works Project Administration (WPA) artists and Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers, they will symbolize or illustrate the main events shown in the timeline on pp. 180–81.

**Selections:** Images throughout the book and the timeline

1. Divide the class into eight small groups, one for each column listed in the timeline.
2. Have each group review the events listed in its assigned column, consulting both written and visual sources in *The Depression and New Deal*. Students may decide to add events to those listed in the timeline in order to produce a comprehensive illustrated timeline of the era.
3. When each group has decided which events to include in its section of the timeline and has reviewed the visual images in McElvaine's book, provide each group with a sheet of poster board. The size of the poster boards will depend on the display space available.

4. Have each small group produce an illustrated timeline section showing the important events and visual representations and symbols of those events. Students may collect clippings from old magazines and newspapers, or they may draw or paint their own illustrations.
5. Post the illustrated timeline sections on classroom or corridor wall, or fasten them to a clothesline strung near the classroom ceiling.
6. Present the timeline to the class by having the students in each group describe their work.

### LESSON 3. DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION (DBQ)

**Objective:** In a document-based question, students have the opportunity to act as historians. They evaluate information from a number of primary sources in order to answer a question with broad implications. A DBQ should be constructed in such a way that there is no obvious "right answer," just as there is no single right answer for many of history's lessons.

To understand and use each primary document effectively, the student must ask questions such as:

- Who was the author?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What were the author's goals?

In addition to these questions, students use the steps below to think about the document-based question, evaluate the information available, and formulate a hypothesis to answer the target question. In writing a coherent and persuasive essay, a student should:

1. Read the documents, taking notes on important points.
2. Formulate a generalization—a single, clear, complete sentence (thesis)—that answers the question. Begin the essay with this statement.
3. Prepare an outline to organize the information he/she will use to support the thesis, using the

documents themselves as evidence. It is not necessary to use all the documents, but most should be addressed.

4. Draft a convincing essay by drawing evidence from the documents. In the process of developing his/her argument, the student should refer to the sources and explain how the information contained in the documents supports the thesis. When sources contradict each other, the student should evaluate the material and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the conflicting sources.

5. Summarize his/her findings and draw a conclusion that "nails down" the impact of the thesis.

6. Use peer review/evaluation rubric to improve and revise the draft.

#### Selections:

Charles Kettering, "Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied," p. 18; Herbert Hoover, 1928 nomination acceptance speech, p. 20; Charles Walker, "Relief and Revolution," p. 28; Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, p. 42; Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Forgotten Man" radio address, p. 170; John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 174; Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, p. 176; Franklin D. Roosevelt, acceptance speech, p. 177

**DBQ Assignment:** A main theme of McElvaine's book is that the Depression and New Deal era led to some important shifts in values. Using the specific selections listed above and others from *The Depression and New Deal*, assess the validity of the following statement from p. 169: "Perhaps the most significant impact of the depression was on the values embraced by the citizens of the United States."

## SELECTED RESOURCES

### Printed Sources

Baldwin, Sidney. *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968.

Hoover, Herbert. "The American System of Self-Government." FDR's Second Inaugural Address. Irving Berlin. "God Bless America." In *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation*, ed. Diane Ravitch. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.

*OAH Magazine of History*. Vol. 16, no. 1 (Fall 2001). The entire issue focuses on the Great Depression.

Pells, Richard H. *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Scharf, Lois. *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism*. Boston: Twayne, 1987.

### Websites

<http://www.aande.com>. A&E Television

<http://www.historychannel.com>. The History Channel

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?titleID=67>. Website being constructed through collaborative efforts of University of Houston; Chicago Historical Society; The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Park Service, Department of the Interior; and The Project for Active Teaching of American History

Subtopics of interest include:

- The Election of 1928
- Herbert Hoover
- The Consumer Economy and Mass Entertainment
- The Formation of Modern American Mass Culture
- Low Brow and Middle Brow Culture
- The Avant-Garde
- The New Woman

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