What Drove the Dust?

Compare evidence and expert explanations of the Dust Bowl

WG.P.1.2.B "Evaluate points of agreement and disagreement from reliable information and expert interpretations used to answer supporting questions related to content knowledge."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one finding from each set of records, circle a claim both experts accept, and write 1 beside the climate historian's main claim and 2 beside the soil scientist's main claim. These marks will help you track where the explanations agree and disagree.

Why Were the Dust Bowl Storms So Severe?

1. During the 1930s, huge dust storms swept across the Great Plains, darkening skies and damaging farms. Our supporting question is: Why did these storms become so severe? Historical weather records from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) document years of low rainfall and extreme heat in the region. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) farm reports describe extensive plowing of native grassland for crops before the worst storms. Grass roots had held soil in place; plowed ground left more soil exposed to wind. These records describe conditions, but they do not by themselves rank the causes.

2. A climate historian interprets the NOAA record as the strongest clue: prolonged drought dried the soil across a vast area, even where farming practices differed. A soil scientist reads the USDA reports differently, arguing that widespread plowing made storms unusually destructive because loose topsoil could blow away. Both experts accept that drought dried the land and that plowing exposed soil. They disagree about which factor best explains the storms' severity, not about whether either factor existed. Each interpretation connects a reliable record to a causal claim, but neither record alone compares storm damage in similarly dry places with different land use.

3. The evidence also has limits. Weather records show when dry conditions occurred, but not how much soil each field lost. Farm reports show what many growers planted and plowed, but do not measure the strength of every storm. A comparison of equally dry counties with different amounts of plowed land could test whether farming practices changed the damage. For now, the best-supported answer includes both drought and exposed soil while leaving their relative weight open. A reader should not treat the experts' disagreement as proof that the records are unreliable. It is a dispute about how to explain evidence both accept.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What do both experts agree happened, and which record supports each part of their shared view?

2. Where do the experts disagree, and which record does each expert emphasize?

3. A classmate says the NOAA records prove plowing did not matter. Evaluate that claim using the passage.

4. Why could comparing equally dry counties with different amounts of plowed land help resolve the experts' disagreement?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Propose a different reliable record you would seek to investigate the experts' disagreement. Explain how two possible findings from that record would affect their interpretations and why you would trust the record.

ANSWER KEY

What Drove the Dust?

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one finding from each set of records, circle a claim both experts accept, and write 1 beside the climate historian's main claim and 2 beside the soil scientist's main claim. These marks will help you track where the explanations agree and disagree. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What do both experts agree happened, and which record supports each part of their shared view?	**Both agree that drought dried the land and plowing exposed soil. NOAA weather records support the drought finding, while USDA farm reports support the plowing finding.**
2	Where do the experts disagree, and which record does each expert emphasize?	**They disagree about which factor best explains the storms' severity. The climate historian emphasizes drought and NOAA records; the soil scientist emphasizes plowing and USDA reports.**
3	A classmate says the NOAA records prove plowing did not matter. Evaluate that claim using the passage.	**The claim is not supported. NOAA records document dry conditions but do not show how much soil fields lost or rule out an effect from plowing.**
4	Why could comparing equally dry counties with different amounts of plowed land help resolve the experts' disagreement?	**Holding dryness similar would make it easier to judge whether differences in plowing were linked to differences in storm damage.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would seek dated soil-loss measurements from a university research station that tracked plowed and unplowed fields during the same dry years. If plowed fields lost much more soil, that would strengthen the soil scientist's interpretation. If both types of fields lost similar amounts, that would strengthen the climate historian's interpretation. Measurements recorded with dates and consistent methods would make the comparison more trustworthy.

Accept other reliable records if students explain how contrasting possible findings would affect the two interpretations. Students should distinguish evidence that both experts accept from their disagreement about which cause mattered more.