

## Grades 6-8, Prompt for Informative / Explanatory Writing Common Core Standard W.CCR.2

Great historical events often have deep effects upon the people who live through them. Depending on the person and the situation, those effects can be very different – or not.

The Great Depression of the 1930s, in the United States, was one of these events. Lasting for nearly ten years, the Great Depression closed thousands of banks, put millions of people out of work, and seared itself into the memory of those who lived through it.

The President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, responded by creating new government programs to help Americans, known as the New Deal.

You are going to read three texts about the Great Depression: a memoir called *Digging In* by Robert Hastings, a poem, “Debts” by Karen Hesse, and a short text about the programs of the New Deal of President Roosevelt. As you read and re-read these texts, think about what the texts show you about how the Great Depression seems to have affected the individual people who lived through it.

Finally, using these texts, you will write an essay, explaining your thinking.

For the essay, your Focusing Question is:

**According to these texts, what effect did the Great Depression have on people who lived through it? Be sure to use evidence from the texts to support and develop your thinking.**

Remember, a good informative essay:

- *Has a clear introduction*
- *States a focus/topic clearly, precisely, and thoughtfully*
- *Uses specific evidence from the text(s) to support and develop the topic and explains that evidence*
- *Concludes effectively*
- *Uses precise language*
- *Shows control over conventions*

You will have three class periods to complete this reading/thinking/writing task. The essay will have a single draft, and you may want to take some time to plan your writing before you begin work. When you have finished, be sure to proofread.

**Informative / Explanatory Writing**  
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**6-8**

*Teacher Directions*

- The texts provide the information needed to address the prompt. Read the texts aloud to all students. Then, students should independently read the texts carefully before writing. You may reread text aloud as needed for struggling students. Encourage students to refer back to the text while writing and to take notes, and to mark up the text as much as is helpful to them.
- Students should be given three sessions for the prompt. Allow approximately 45 minutes for each, but the prompt should not be strictly timed. Students should be given as much time as needed to plan, write, and proofread.
- The writing must be done without help, but students may have access to personal dictionaries, or any other resources to support spelling and mechanics that they are accustomed to using while writing.
  - Be sure students have paper to take notes or do whatever pre-planning they might choose to do.
  - If students are writing by hand, provide lined paper from your classroom for writing. If they are using a word processor, make sure they save their work so it can be accessed the next day.
- This will be first draft writing, but encourage students to proofread and correct any errors they find.

## Digging In

By Robert J. Hastings

The closing of Old West Side Mine meant the end of anything resembling a steady job for the next eight years. From 1930 on, it was a day's work here and a day's work there, a coal order from the welfare office, a few days on WPA, a garden in the back yard, and a few chickens and eggs.

We weathered the storm because of Dad's willingness to take any job and Mom's ability to stretch every available dollar. It was not so much a matter of finding a job as of filling in with odd jobs wherever and whenever you could, and most of the "jobs" were those you made for yourself.

My diary shows that Dad sold iron cords door to door, "worked a day in the hay," bought a horse to break gardens, rented an extra lot for a garden on the shares, picked peaches, raised sweet potato slips, traded an occasional dozen of eggs at the grocery, hung wallpaper, "painted Don Albright's house for \$5," picked up a day or two's work at the strip mines, guarded the fence at the county fairgrounds, cut hair for boys in the neighborhood, sold coal orders, and when he had to and could, worked intermittently on WPA.

With no dependable income, we cut back on everything possible. We stopped the evening paper, turned off the city water and cleaned out our well, sold our four-door Model T touring car with the snap-on side curtains and isinglass, stopped ice and milk delivery, and disconnected our gas range for all but the three hot summer months. There was no telephone to disconnect, as we didn't have one to start with!

We did keep up regular payments on two Metropolitan Life Insurance policies. Page after page of old receipt books show entries of 10 cents per week on one policy and 69 cents a month on another. As long as we could, we made house payments to the Marion Building and Loan, but a day came when we had to let those go, too.

Fortunately, we were able to save our house from foreclosure. When so many borrowers defaulted, the Marion Building and Loan went bankrupt. Creditors were allowed to pay just about any amount to satisfy the receivers. But that was the catch – who had "just about any amount" to pay? A house behind ours sold for \$25. Many good houses in Marion sold for \$5 to \$100 and were torn down and moved to nearby towns. We settled with the loan company for \$125, or ten cents on the dollar for our \$1250 mortgage. I'll never forget the day Dad cleared it all up, making two or three trips to town to bring papers home for Mom to sign. He was able to borrow the \$125 from his aunt, Dialtha James, who as the widow of a Spanish-American war veteran had a small pension.

Looking back, I find it amazing what we did without. A partial list would include toothpaste (we used soda), toilet paper (we used the catalog), newspaper or magazine subscriptions, soft drinks, potato chips and snacks, bakery goods except bread and an occasional dozen of doughnuts, paper clips, rubber bands and restaurant meals. We had no water bill, sewer bill, telephone bill, no car expenses – gasoline, tires, batteries, licenses, insurance, repairs – no laundry service, no dry cleaning (we pressed woolens up with a hot iron and wet cloth), no bank service charge (no bank account), no sales or income tax. We sent no greeting cards except maybe half a dozen at Christmas...

Typical of the simple economies Mom practiced was keeping the electric bill to \$1 a month and the gas bill to \$1 a month in June, July, and August....Since our only appliance was an electric iron, the chief use of electricity was for lighting. With only a single bulb suspended by a cord from the ceiling of each room, there weren't many lights to burn...On winter evenings, Mom would turn on the kitchen light while she cooked supper. If I had lessons I brought them to the kitchen table or sprawled on the floor between the kitchen and dining room.

After supper we "turned off the light in the kitchen" and moved to the dining-sitting room, where another light was switched on. If we wanted to read on winter afternoons, we sat as near a window as possible, with the curtains pinned back, to save the lights until it was nearly dark...

Dad had some old-fashioned shoe lasts, and he would buy stick-'em-on soles at the dime store to patch our shoes in winter. With simple barber tools he cut my hair and that of other kids in the neighborhood, for maybe ten cents a head. In cold, wet weather, when he worked outdoors on WPA, he often cut strips of cardboard to stuff in the soles of his shoes and keep his feet warm.

We took care of what we had. Every cotton cloth was used over as a dish cloth, wash cloth, dust cloth, shoe-shining cloth, window-washing cloth, to scrub and wax floors, make bandages, make quilt pieces, make kite tails, or to tie boxes and papers together. The cotton bags from flour, salt, and cracked chicken feed were washed, bleached, and cut into dish cloths and towels. Some neighbors made curtains or even dresses from feed sacks. Every paper bag was saved for lunches or cut and used for wrapping paper. String was wound into balls for later use.

Each August Mom would find someone who was a year ahead of me in school, and buy his used books. One exception was a spelling book used in all eight grades. Since it was to be used for eight years, we decided it would be a wise investment to buy a new one when I started first grade. In the seventh grade, I dropped that speller in the snow. I thought Mom was unfair when she sent me all the way back to school, retracing my steps to look for the book...

Before the Depression, we hung a four-cornered black-and-white cardboard sign in the front window each morning. The figures in the corners told the iceman how many pounds to bring – 25, 50, 75, or 100. But ice was one of the casualties of the Depression, although we managed a small piece two or three times a week for iced tea. About eleven in the morning I would pull a little wagon, filled with a gunny sack and assorted old quilts and tarpaulins, down to the neighborhood ice house to buy a “nickel’s worth of ice,” which was half of a 25-pound chunk. By wrapping it carefully and storing it in a cool, damp spot under the house, we could stretch that piece of ice for two or three days. In rainy, cool weather, maybe four days! It was our glistening prize, and any left over from tea was emptied back into a pitcher of ice water, or used for lemonade that afternoon. So as not to waste any, we chipped only what was needed, with much of the same care used by a diamond cutter.

Whatever was free was our recreation. This may have included playing records on our wind-up victrola or listening to the radio. You might watch a parachute jump at the airport or a free ball game at the city park, with perhaps a free band concert afterwards...the band concerts survived only the first two years of the Depression...

We liked music, and one of my earliest memories is of Dad singing to me:

Two arms that hold me tight,  
Two lips that kiss goodnight;  
To me he’ll always be,  
That little boy of mine.

No one can ever know,  
Just what his coming has meant:  
He’s something heaven has sent,  
That little boy of mine.

At one point in the Depression, the cupboard was literally bare of money. We weren’t hungry, but we were penniless. Then Dad went back in the pantry and came out with a jar in which he had saved a few nickels and dimes for such an emergency.

Later, Mom said to me, “I’ve learned that whatever happens, your Daddy always has a little dab of money put back somewhere...”

Excerpted from “Digging In”, 1986. Found in *Dark Days*, Perfection Learning, 2006  
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## Debts

By Karen Hesse

Daddy is thinking  
of taking a loan from Mr. Roosevelt and his men,  
to get some new wheat planted  
where the winter crop has spindled out and died.  
Mr. Roosevelt promises  
Daddy won't have to pay a dime  
till the crop comes in.

Daddy says,  
"I can turn the fields over,  
start again.  
It's sure to rain soon.  
Wheat's sure to grow."

Ma says, "What if it doesn't?"

Daddy takes off his hat,  
roughs up his hair,  
puts the hat back on.  
"Course it'll rain," he says.

Ma says, "Bay,  
it hasn't rained enough to grow wheat in  
three years."

Daddy looks like a fight brewing.

He takes that red face of his out to the barn,  
To keep from feuding with my pregnant ma.

I ask Ma

how, after all this time,

Daddy still believes in rain.

“Well, it rains enough,” Ma says,

“now and again,

to keep a person hoping.

But even if it didn’t

your daddy would have to believe.

It’s coming on spring,

and he’s a farmer.”

March 1934

## The New Deal

In 1932 [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) was elected overwhelmingly on a campaign promising a New Deal for the American people. Roosevelt worked quickly upon his election to deliver the New Deal, an unprecedented number of reforms addressing the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression. Unlike his predecessor, [Herbert Hoover](#), who felt that the public should support the government and not the other way around, Roosevelt felt it was the federal government's duty to help the American people weather these bad times.

Together with his "brain trust," a group of university scholars and liberal theorists, Roosevelt sought the best course of action for the struggling nation. A desperate Congress gave him carte blanche and rubber-stamped his proposals in order to expedite the reforms. During the first 100 days of his presidency, a never-ending stream of bills was passed, to relieve poverty, reduce unemployment, and speed economic recovery.

His first act as president was to declare a four-day bank holiday, during which time Congress drafted the Emergency Banking Bill of 1933, which stabilized the banking system and restored the public's faith in the banking industry by putting the federal government behind it. Three months later, he signed the Glass-Steagall Act which created the FDIC, federally insuring deposits

The [Civil Conservation Corps](#) was one of the New Deal's most successful programs. It addressed the pressing problem of unemployment by sending 3 million single men from age 17 to 23 to the nation's forests to work. Living in camps in the forests, the men dug ditches, built reservoirs and planted trees. The men, all volunteers, were paid \$30 a month, with two thirds being sent home. The [Works Progress Administration](#), Roosevelt's major work relief program, would employ more than 8.5 million people to build bridges, roads, public buildings, parks and airports.

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the National Recovery Administration (NRA) were designed to address unemployment by regulating the number of hours worked per week and banning child labor. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), created in 1933, gave \$3 billion to states for work relief programs. The Agricultural Adjustment Act subsidized farmers for reducing crops and provided loans for farmers facing bankruptcy. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) helped people save their homes from foreclosure.



While they did not end the Depression, the New Deal's experimental programs helped the American people immeasurably by taking care of their basic needs and giving them the dignity of work and hope.

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