

CONTEXTUALIZATION: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Purpose

Use your contextualization skills to understand the historical context that led to a global economic depression. By investigating the context for the Great Depression, you'll deepen your understanding of how both capitalism and globalization played a role in it. You'll also analyze how these events still impact the world today and the lessons that can be learned from studying the origins and context of this historical event.

Process

1. Read the following excerpt from Louis Adamic's *My America*, published in 1938.

The Doorbell Rang: 1932

...At about a quarter to eight one cold morning in mid-January 1932, while we were at breakfast, the doorbell rang...I was confronted by two children: a girl, as we learned afterward, of ten and a boy of eight. Not very adequate for the season and weather, their clothing was patched but clean. They carried school books.

"Excuse me, Mister," said the girl in a voice that sounded older than she looked, "but we have no eats in our house and my mother said I should take my brother before we go to school and ring a doorbell in some house"—she swallowed heavily and took a deep breath—"and ask you to give us something to eat."

[Adamic invited the children inside and gave them some food. While they were eating, Adamic asked them a few questions about their situation.] "We used to live on the fourth floor upstairs and we had three rooms and a kitchen and bath, now we have only one room downstairs, in back."

"Why did you move downstairs?" ...

"My father ... he lost his job when the panic came. That was two years ago, I was eight and Jimmie was six. My father he tried to get work, but he couldn't, the Depression was so bad. But he called it the panic." ...

"Where is your father now?"

"We don't know. He went away four months ago, right after Labor Day, and he never came back, so we had to move downstairs. The landlord didn't want to throw us out, so he told my mother to move in downstairs." ...

I went to the school [the children attended] and learned from the girl's teacher that, while such cases were not yet numerous in that neighborhood, they were increasing. Some children rang doorbells, others brought slips of paper

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from their mothers, asking teachers to please “get the school” to provide shoes for them; they were unable to do so themselves. The school had no funds for such emergencies; so some of the teachers bought shoes for these pupils out of their own pockets.

Source: Adamic, Louis. *My America*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938 (pp. 279–280).

2. Underline one or two sentences from the primary excerpt that stand out to you, or surprise you. Explain why.

3. Review or read the article “[Global Great Depression](#).” Based on what you know about the Great Depression, why had conditions become so awful by the early 1930s?

4. Complete the Contextualization Tool (starting on the next page).

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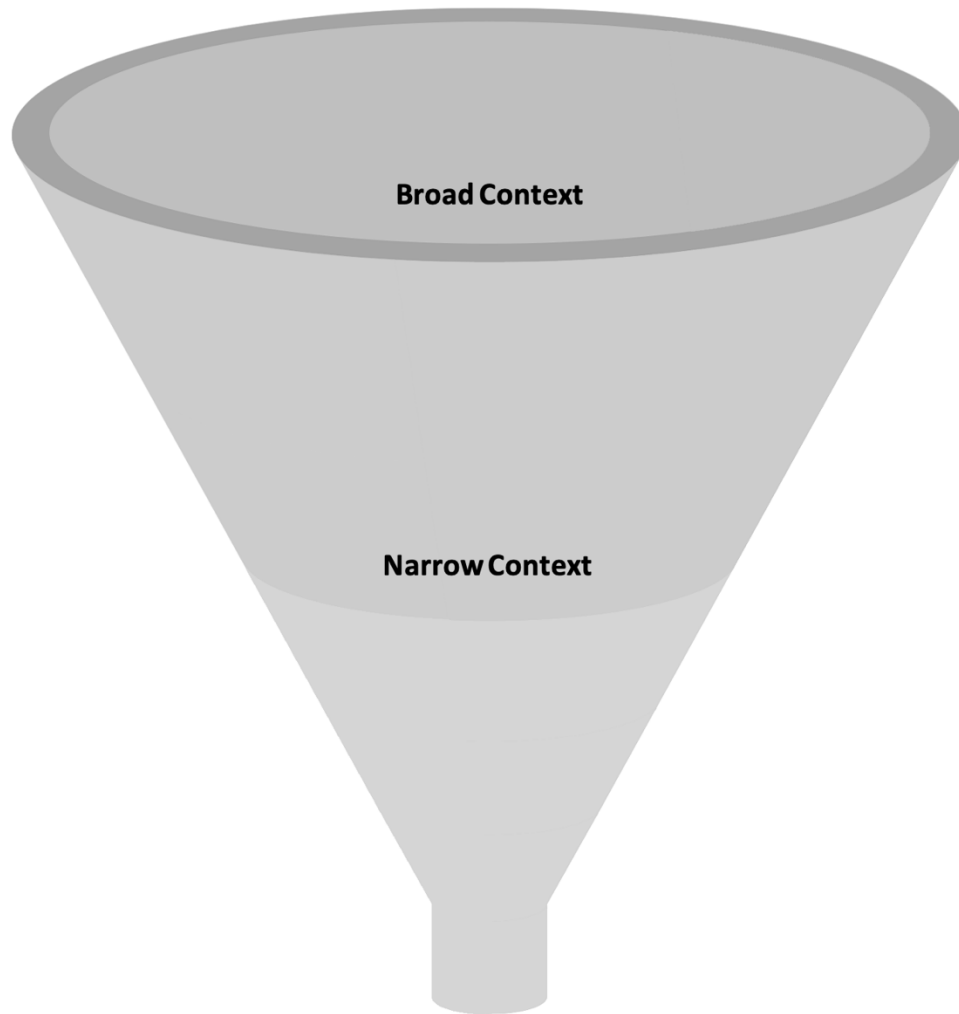
Contextualization Tool

Write the historical event/development being studied.

Write the date(s) and location(s) of the historical event being studied.

Event Cards: Cut [out the Events Cards](#), and then place them on the funnel to show whether they represent narrow or broad context. Be prepared to explain your placement. You can also complete this portion of the activity by clicking the link for [Google Slides](#). You'll need to create a copy of the slides.

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Broad context: Wide ranging or long term

Does the context represent wide-ranging themes, trends, events, eras, or regions related to the historical development?

Does it represent a long-term (underlying) cause or contributing factor?

Narrow context: Limited or short term

Does the context represent limited themes, trends, events, eras, or regions that are more closely tied in time/place to the historical development?

Does it help us see the short-term (immediate) causes or contributing factors?

Historical event/development: _____

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5. Write one or two sentences that describe the broad context of this event.

6. Write one or two sentences that describe the narrow context of this event.

7. Analyze how the broad and narrow contexts help you better understand the historical event.

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8. Use information from the Contextualization Tool and the article “[Global Great Depression](#)” to write a three-paragraph mini-essay response that answers this prompt: *What was it about the economic and political situation of the early twentieth century that allowed for the global disaster that was the Great Depression?*

Your response should follow this structure:

- **Paragraph 1:** An introduction to the essay that includes the broad context and the thesis statement (either at the start or the end of the paragraph).
- **Paragraph 2:** Focus on the narrow context and include evidence that explains why the economic and political conditions of the early twentieth century led to a global depression.
- **Paragraph 3:** The conclusion with an analysis of how understanding context improves the ability to interpret the Great Depression.