

## CONTEXTUALIZATION: CHILD LABOR

### Purpose

Use the historical thinking practice of contextualization to understand how and why ideas about childhood began to change with industrialization (c. 1750 to 1914 CE). By contextualizing this period, you'll understand why these nineteenth-century changes to childhood took place, and how they prompted industrial societies to see child labor as problematic in a way previous societies had not.

### Process

1. Read the passage below, and then review the images on the next three pages:

*Imagine you're 8 years old and living in the nineteenth century. But instead of getting up and getting ready to go to school, you're getting up to go to work. At 4:00 a.m.! If you were a boy who lived in coal-mining country, there was a good chance you were headed off to a coal mine, where you would put in 13 hours or more. Coal mines were extremely dangerous and unhealthy, with cramped passages, toxic coal dust, and explosive coal gas. If you were a boy or girl who lived in the city, you were probably headed off to a textile (clothing) factory, which were also very unhealthy and dangerous places. Now, that might sound awful—and to be clear, it was—but before the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of "childhood" didn't really exist. Children were expected to contribute to the economic well-being of the family. For most of human history, that meant helping secure and produce food. After the Industrial Revolution, it also meant mine or factory work to earn a meager wage for your family, but a nice profit for the mine or factory owner.*

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*"Breaker Boys," Pittston, PA, 1911. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Image courtesy of National Archives at College Park, Department of Commerce and Labor, Children's Bureau. Public domain.*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group\\_of\\_breaker\\_boys.\\_Smallest\\_is\\_Sam\\_Belloma.\\_Pittston,\\_Pa.\\_-NARA\\_-\\_523383.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group_of_breaker_boys._Smallest_is_Sam_Belloma._Pittston,_Pa._-NARA_-_523383.jpg)



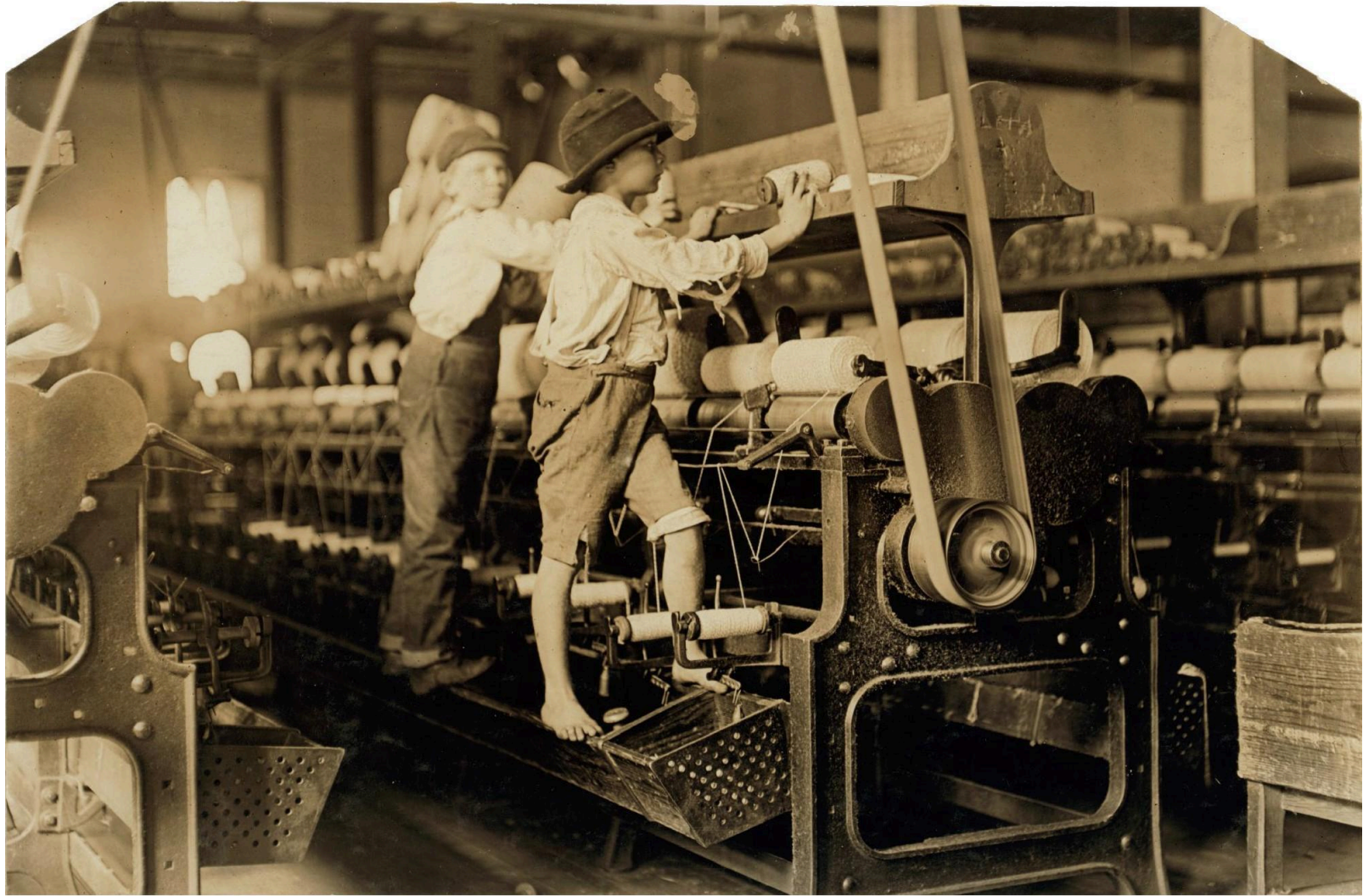
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*"Pennsylvania Coal Breakers (Breaker Boys)," 1912. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Public domain.*  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pennsylvania\\_coal\\_breakers.\\_\(Breaker\\_Boys\).\\_1912.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pennsylvania_coal_breakers._(Breaker_Boys)._1912.jpg)



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*Children working in a textile mill, Macon, Georgia, 1909. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Image courtesy of the US Library of Congress.*  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mill\\_Children\\_in\\_Macon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mill_Children_in_Macon.jpg)

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2. Now, fill out the Contextualization Tool using what you've learned from this lesson.

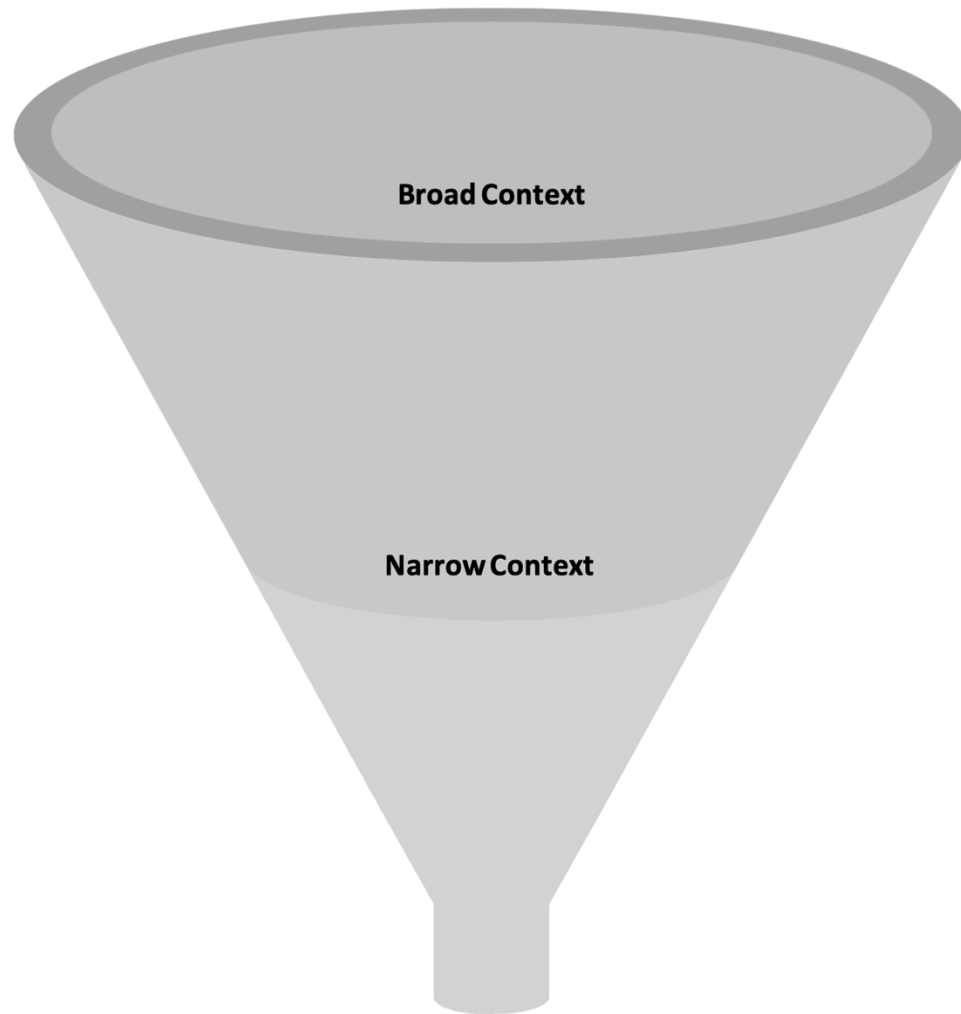
### Contextualization Tool

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.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION: CHILD LABOR



**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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3. Read the “[Child Labor and Reform Movements](#)” article. If you need to adjust your categorization of broad and narrow context after reading the article, then do that before you move on to the next step.
4. Write one or two sentences that describe the broad context of this event.

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

6. Analyze how the broad and narrow context help you better understand the historical event.

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7. Use information from the Contextualization Tool and the article “Child Labor” to write a one paragraph response that answers this prompt: *What historical context related to the **time period**, **location**, and **culture** changed people’s ideas about childhood and child labor in industrialized societies?*