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# Early Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?

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**Overview:** In May 1607, a group of roughly 100 Englishmen landed in Virginia. They would soon establish the first permanent English colony in what is now the United States. The early years of settlement were not easy. This Mini-Q asks why so many colonists died.

## The Documents:

- Document A: Drought in Jamestown
- Document B: Occupations of First Settlers
- Document C: Harsh and Cruel Dealing
- Document D: Timeline and Cause of Settler Deaths

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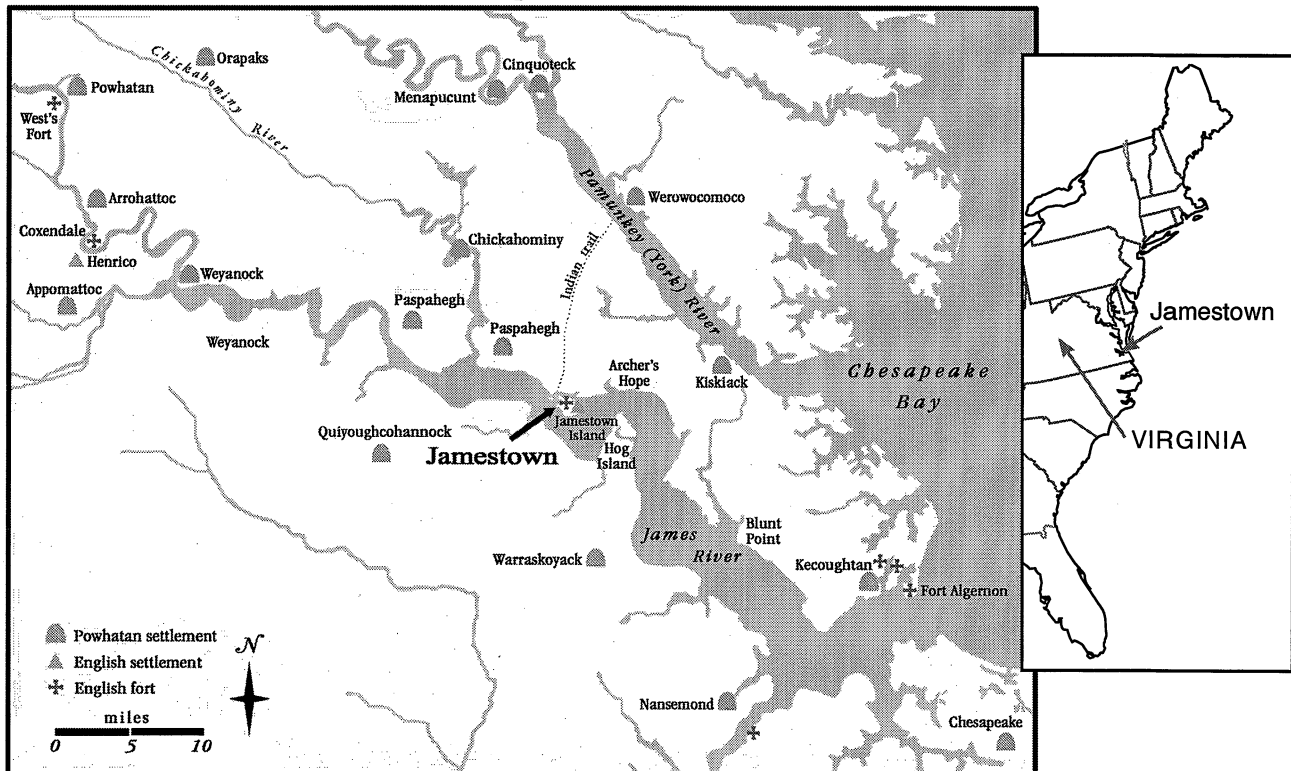
A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Hook Exercise: Jamestown

**Directions:** Examine the map below and, with a partner, discuss the questions that follow. Be ready to share your thinking with the class.

**Note:** The Powhatans were a Native American tribe living in Virginia.

### Principal Powhatan and English Settlements, 1607-1611



### Questions:

1. In what modern-day state is this region located?
2. What can you infer (guess) about who lived in this area before the arrival of the English?
3. Why do you think the English would choose to settle here?
4. Is there any evidence that the English expected trouble?
5. Is there any evidence that the English may have been too confident?
6. By looking at this map, can you make any predictions why so many colonists died at Jamestown?

## Early Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?

In the spring of 1607, three English ships carrying roughly 100 **colonists** sailed into the Chesapeake Bay and up the James River. Hopes were high. This was to be the first permanent English settlement in the New World. The king of England, James I, had given the colonists his blessing. From their ships, the settlers could see freshwater streams and, as one of them wrote, “faire meddowes and goodly tall trees.”

True, there were dangers. A Spanish warship or two would not be a surprise. Also, an earlier English colony on nearby Roanoke Island had failed. In fact, all of the Roanoke colonists had mysteriously disappeared. But in 1607, these were acceptable risks.

Perhaps the biggest worry for the Jamestown colonists was that they were not the only ones living in the Chesapeake region. It was home to some 15,000 **Powhatan** Indians. They were ruled by a great chief named Wahunsonacock. One of Wahunsonacock’s daughters was the famous Native American princess, Pocahontas.

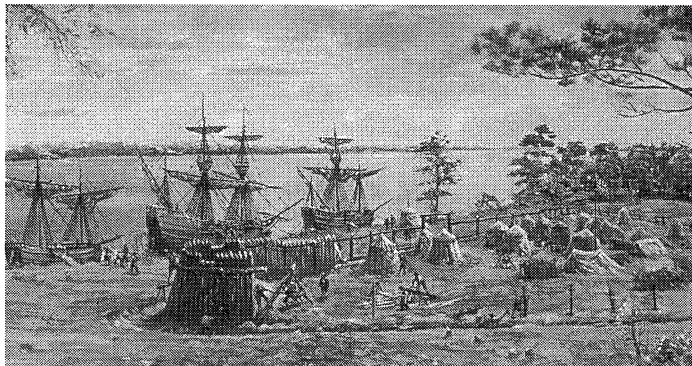
When the English settlers arrived, they built a fort on a place they called James Island. This was to become Jamestown. By the end of the year, only 40 of the

original settlers would be alive. The arrival in January of a resupply ship saved the colony. However, hard times continued. Captain John Smith, who had provided much-needed leadership, was sent back to England. Then, in the awful period of 1609-1610, more than half of the **settlement** died.

Remarkably, the English kept coming—first men, and later women and children. Most were young and poor. They hoped

to work off their debts and, one day, own a piece of land. A few arrived with money, and some would find success growing tobacco. But for most, there was no happy ending. By 1611, 400 of the more than 500 settlers who had arrived at Jamestown were dead.

It is truly amazing that the colony survived. The English, both in Jamestown and back in the **mother country**, were a determined bunch. Our focus, however, is not on the survival but on the near destruction of Jamestown. Four documents can only tell part of the story, but that is the challenge of this Mini-Q. Examine the documents that follow and then answer the question: *Early Jamestown: Why did so many colonists die?*



Building the fort at Jamestown, Virginia, 1607

## Background Essay Questions and Check for Understanding

1. How many Englishmen arrived in Virginia in 1607?
2. Who was already living in the Chesapeake Bay region?
3. By 1611, how many settlers had arrived? How many had died?

4. Define these terms:

colonists

Powhatan

settlement

mother country

- ✓ Write a two- to three-sentence summary of the Background Essay, describing time, place, and story.

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### Timeline

**1492** — Columbus arrives in the Americas

**1607** — Jamestown is colonized

**1616** — Pocahontas visits the king of England

**1619** — First African Americans arrive as slaves in Jamestown

**1620** — Pilgrims arrive in Massachusetts

## Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

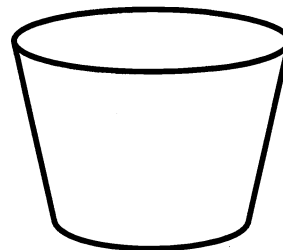
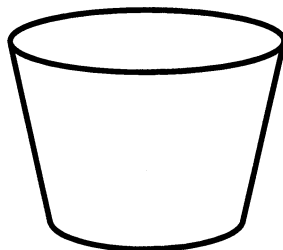
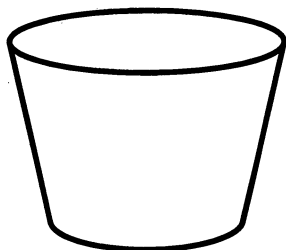
### Understanding the Question

1. What is the Mini-Q question?
2. Which terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

### Pre-Bucketing

*You don't want to write an essay from a big pile of jumbled evidence! Bucketing will help you sort your evidence into groups or categories.*

**Directions:** Using clues from the Mini-Q question, write labels under the buckets. At this point, your labels should be very general. Later, as you read through the documents, the labels can be changed to become more specific.

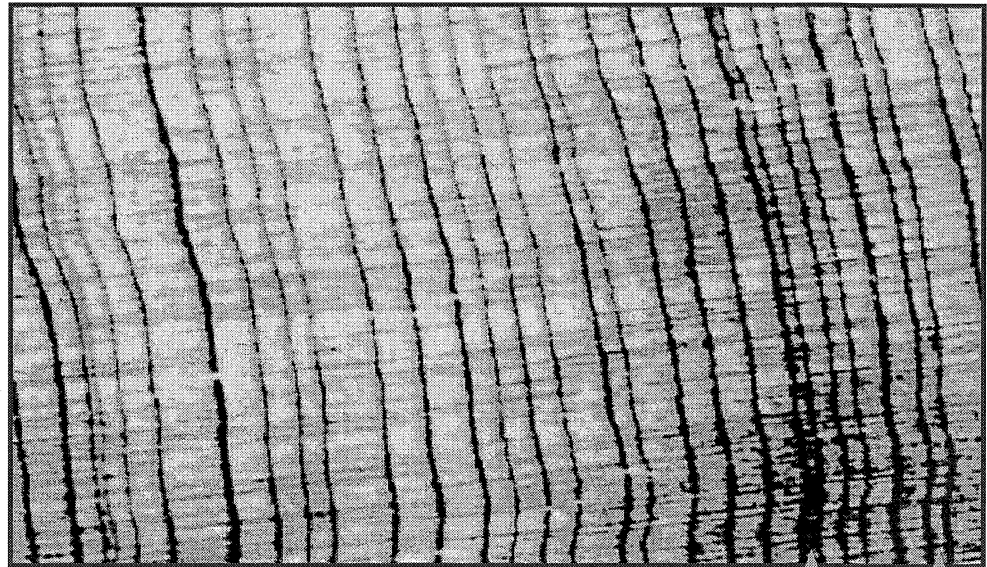
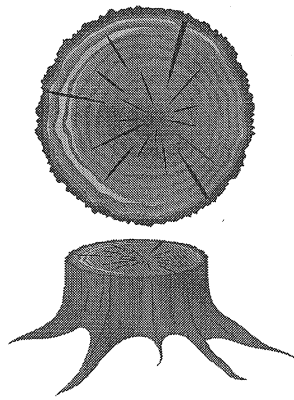


## Document A: Drought in Jamestown

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**Source:** Close-up image of tree rings courtesy of NASA.

**Note:** Tree rings show the yearly growth of a tree. When a tree is cut down, you can clearly see these rings on the stump. The skinny, dark lines indicate winter, when a tree doesn't grow much. The wider, lighter bands indicate spring and summer, when a tree does most of its growing. If these light rings are wide, it means there was plenty of rainfall and good growth that year. A narrow ring usually means less rain, or even **drought**. The close-up image on the right shows annual growth rings from an old cypress tree. This tree was alive in the 1500s and 1600s near Jamestown.



Jamestown:  
1606-1611

### Document Analysis

1. What is a tree ring?
2. Where and when did the cypress tree pictured on the right live?
3. Look at the tree rings on the Jamestown cypress from the years 1606-1611. Are these rings thinner or thicker than the 12 rings that came before?
4. In the winter of 1609-1610, Jamestown settlers faced the “starving time.” Based on this document, what inference (educated guess) can you make about the cause of this “starving time”?
5. Is there any way that drought might explain bad relations between the English colonists and the Powhatans? Explain.



**Document B: Occupations of First Settlers**

**Source:** Adapted from *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles, Book III* by Captain John Smith, 1624.

<b>Jamestown Passenger Ship Lists</b>		
<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Original Settlers May 1607</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Resupply January 1608</b>
Council (governors)	6	1
Gentlemen	47	28
Laborers	12	21
Cooper (barrel maker)	0	1
Carpenter	4	0
Blacksmith	1	1
Sailor (sail maker)	1	0
Barber	1	0
Bricklayer	1	0
Mason	1	0
Tobacco pipe maker	0	1
Tailor	1	6
Drummer	1	0
Preacher	1	0
Boys (young servants)	4	0
Jeweler	0	1
Refiners and goldsmiths	0	4
Gunsmith	0	1
Perfumer (wig maker)	0	1
Apothecaries (druggists)	0	2
Surgeon	1	1
Occupation unknown	28	51
<b>TOTAL MALE</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>TOTAL FEMALE</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Gentleman:</b> A person of wealth who was not used to working with his hands		

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**Document Analysis**

1. According to this document, how many settlers arrived in Jamestown in May 1607?  
In January 1608?
2. How many of the settlers from each group were female?
3. By January 1608, 230 settlers had arrived in Jamestown. How many were gentlemen?  
What is a “gentleman”?
4. Of the 110 settlers who arrived in May 1607, nearly 70 were dead by December.  
What information in the passenger lists might explain why?

## Document C: Harsh and Cruel Dealing

Source: Ivor Noel Hume, *The Virginia Adventure*, 1994.

[In 1609] Francis West and thirty-six men [sailed] up the Chesapeake Bay to try to trade for corn with the... [Powhatan] Indians.... [This settlement] had seen less of the English...and with luck might be more friendly....

Though West was able to load his [small ship] with grain, the success involved “some [harsh] and [cruel dealing] by cutting off [two] of the [savages’] heads and other [extremities]....”

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### Document Analysis

1. Why did Francis West sail up the Chesapeake?
2. Is there any evidence that the English forced the Powhatans to trade their corn?
3. Document A provides evidence of drought in Jamestown. What connections can you make between Document A and this document?



**Document D: Timeline and Cause of Settler Deaths**

**Source:** Adapted from "An Abundance of Blood Shed on Both Sides: England's First Indian War, 1609-1614" by J. Frederick Fausz, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, January 1990.

<b>1607-1608</b>		<b>Total Population</b>
14 May, 1607	104 colonists land at Jamestown Island	104
26 May	2 die in first Powhatan attack on Fort James	102
June-August	At least 3 die in Powhatan ambushes	99
August-October	Summer sickness kills half the colonists	49
November	Capt. George Kendall is executed for mutiny	48
December	Powhatans kill 2 colonists; 6 other colonists die (cause unknown)	40
Early 1608	Arrival of 120 men; 2 depart	158
7 September	Smith reports "many dead, some sick"	130
8 October	Capt. Newport arrives with 70 new colonists	200
<b>1609-1610</b>		
Winter 1608-09	8 die during winter	192
Mid-January	11 colonists die in boating accident	181
Summer	100 "sickened and half the number died"	131
11-18 August	6 ships bring 250 new settlers	381
August-October	Of 120 men stationed near the falls, the Powhatans kill "neere halfe"	330
November-May 1610	110 colonists die from famine and disease during Powhatan siege; another 33 slain; 37 desert	150
<b>Siege:</b> to surround an enemy town or fort and, over many days, starve the people out		

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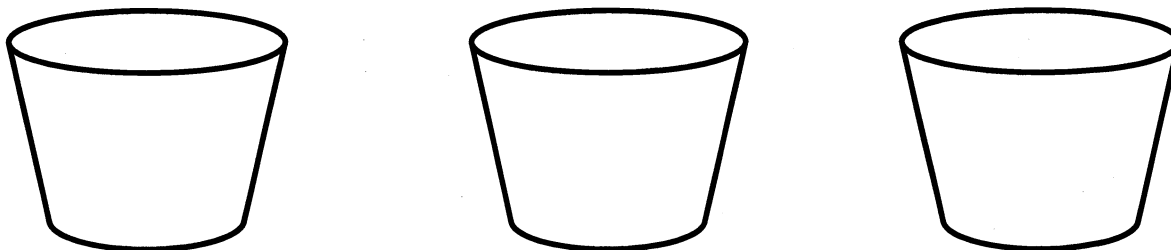
**Document Analysis**

1. In 1607-1608, how many settlers were killed by Powhatans? How many settlers died from other causes?
2. In 1609-1610, how many settlers were killed by Powhatans, including during the siege? How many settlers died from other causes?
3. Compare 1607-1608 and 1609-1610. What general statement can you make about how settlers died during these two time periods?
4. What might explain this increase in the killing of settlers by Powhatans? Make a connection between this document and Document C.

## Bucketing—Getting Ready to Write

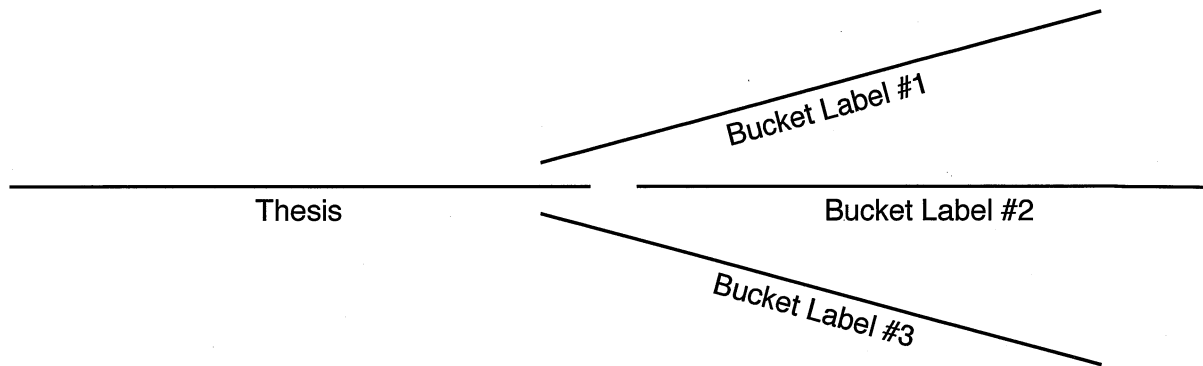
### Bucketing

Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.



### Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis should answer the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



## From Thesis to Essay Writing

### Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

**Working Title:**

#### **Introductory Paragraph**

Grabber:

Background:

Restating the question with key terms defined:

Thesis and road map:

#### **Body Paragraph #1**

Baby Thesis for bucket one:

Evidence: Supporting detail with citation

Argument: Connecting evidence to thesis

#### **Body Paragraph #2**

Baby Thesis for bucket two:

Evidence:

Argument:

#### **Body Paragraph #3**

Baby Thesis for bucket three:

Evidence:

Argument:

#### **Concluding Paragraph**



