

OkNHD Research Guide

Research for National History Day can seem like a daunting task. You might not even know where or how to begin. Here at OkNHD, we want to help! This guide will walk you through the research process from start to finish. There are eight basic steps in the development of a historical research project. Work through the steps, but keep in mind that you may be working on more than one step at the same time. You may even have to go back to previous steps as you work through your project. Do not be discouraged if you do not proceed linearly through all eight steps!

The sample topic used in outlining this process will be Roscoe Dunjee and the *Black Dispatch*.

1. Getting Organized for Research

Organization is a key factor in successful research and it can be helpful to use a paperwork management system.

You will be researching throughout the entirety of your NHD project. Start by coming up with a system of note-taking. You may want to use a spiral notebook, binder, computer, notecards, or other means of taking notes. If you are not sure how to go about note-taking, check out our [Guide to Taking Notes: The Notecard System](#).

Be sure that you record:

- Bibliographic information
- Page numbers of quotes and main ideas
- What you learned from the source—this is this information that you will include in your annotated bibliography

You may want to include a summary, how you will use the source in your project, or questions that this source led you to.

You will also want to figure out how often you will work on your project and when you will try to accomplish specific goals. Find the [Pacing Guides](#) available on the OkNHD site, or your teacher may give you deadlines. Use these deadlines to develop a calendar for yourself and try to stick to it! Getting organized at the beginning of your project will greatly benefit you in the coming days and months, so don't take this step lightly.

2. Selecting a Topic

Teachers should work with students to select a topic related to the annual theme. Brainstorming ideas or looking through the history textbook are great ways to begin thinking about potential topics. For ideas on theme connection and topic selection, please see the NHD annual theme book.

Selecting a topic might be the most important step of your History Day project. To start, check to see if your teacher has any guidelines about topic selection. Your teacher may want you to pick a topic in US history or one that focuses on colonial America. After that, think about this year's theme and come up with a list of ideas that interest you. Ask parents, teachers, friends, and others about their ideas. Try to find a topic that you really enjoy. Consider doing a local history topic, as you will probably have many more resources nearby if you do. Make sure that your topic is not too broad. Also, remember that it MUST relate to the theme! Take advantage of the resources relating to topic selection on the [OkNHD website](#).

3. Background Reading for Historical Context

In the excitement of getting started, students sometimes skip one of the most important steps: building historical context for the research topic. Take time to read widely about your topic, and look at several different history books about the time period in which the topic takes place.

Now that you have a preliminary topic, it's time to start the research process. You want to first focus on overarching ideas. Using our above example of Roscoe Dunjee and the *Black Dispatch*, identify:

- Who was Roscoe Dunjee?
- What was the *Black Dispatch*?

Since this is an Oklahoma topic, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* from the Oklahoma Historical Society is a good place to start. Here we can type in "Roscoe Dunjee" and learn that he was an African American civil rights leader in Oklahoma City and published the *Black Dispatch* newspaper from 1915 to 1954. If you are not doing an Oklahoma-related topic, look for a similar encyclopedia of the state or country in which your topic is focused.

Now that we have an idea of what we are looking for, the next step is to find secondary source materials that will provide historical context for our project. A good place to look for these types of sources is at www.worldcat.org. You can also check with your local library or in your own history textbook.

Terms to search for:

- Civil Rights Movement
- Oklahoma in the early 1900s
- African American newspapers
- Segregation
- African Americans in Oklahoma
- Roscoe Dunjee
- US in the twentieth century

Find at least five general sources that provide context for your topic. Read and take diligent notes and become familiar with the background information on your topic. Make a list of

research questions that you want to find out about your topic. Be sure to include the most important question—how does this topic relate to the theme?

Sample questions:

- What role did Roscoe Dunjee play in the civil rights movement?
- How did his newspaper help him to achieve his goals?
- What rights did Dunjee desire?
- Did he feel a responsibility to fight for those rights?
- How did he grow up?
- Did anyone influence his thinking?

4. Narrow Your Topic

Selecting a National History Day topic is a process of gradually narrowing the area of history (period or event) that interests you. For example, if you are interested in American Indians and the theme is “Rights and Responsibilities in History,” a natural topic would be treaty rights. After reading several texts and journals about American Indians and treaties, the process might look something like this:

Theme: Rights in History; Interest: American Indians; Topics: Treaty Rights; Issue: 1788 Fort Schuyler Treaty

Or, if you have an interest in women’s rights and the theme is the “Individual in History,” you might consider voting rights. After a library search and reading several texts about the era, the you might narrow the topic to the women’s suffrage movement, and then a leader in the struggle for the vote—Alice Paul. In this case, the process would look like this:

Theme: Individual in History; Interest: Women’s Rights; Topic: Suffrage Movement;
Issue/Individual: Alice Paul

If you are interested in science and the theme is “Innovation in History,” perhaps research medical discoveries that changed the world, like the discovery of penicillin or isolating DNA. Resources to support the research might be in libraries, excellent websites, and History of Science Museums. The process for narrowing the topic and connecting with the theme might follow this sequence:

Theme: Innovation in History; Interest: History of Science; Topic: Medical Discoveries;
Issue/Discovery: Penicillin

If you have a broad topic, then use the background information to help narrow your focus. Look for figures or events that interest you within the context of the subject matter. Our OKNHD website has many topic resources to help you narrow your topic. Talk to your teacher or to one of our staff. Ask for help if you need it! Most importantly, always keep the theme in your mind

when considering a topic. You want to make sure that you absolutely know how your topic relates to the theme.

Step 5: Gathering and Recording Information

After you have established a final topic, it's time to start really getting into the advanced research. During this phase, you are going to want to look very specifically at your topic. Your goal should be to learn as much as you possibly can about your topic. Try to look at it from every angle and perspective. Keep digging, even if you think that you have found all that there is to know on your topic. If you need help finding sources, try going to the OkNHD webpage. There is a whole section with resources and links to numerous online archives and databases that can help you. In addition, talk to your teacher, your librarian, and your local library about finding sources. If you find an article or book that you want to read, but cannot access it, they may know of a way to help you. Also, many schools and libraries pay to have subscriptions to databases that can assist you in your research.

There are three types of sources, and you must understand the uses of each.

- [Tertiary](#)
- [Secondary](#)
- [Primary](#)

Start with the secondary sources you have already gathered, particularly the ones most specific to your topic. For instance, we found information on Roscoe Dunjee in an article in an encyclopedia. At the end of that article, sources are cited. We need to write those sources down and attempt to find them. They helped the writers of the article, so they might also help us. Also, on WorldCat, there was a book written about Roscoe Dunjee. At the back of that book will be a bibliography. We can use that bibliography to find more sources on Roscoe Dunjee. Keep using secondary sources in this way in order to find primary sources and to gain more insight into your topic.

In addition, you should look for resources around you. Talk to historians at your local museum. Email a professor at a college or university near you. Consider talking to experts and even interviewing them. On many occasions, these professionals can give you valuable information about your topic as well as ideas about potential sources. In the example of Roscoe Dunjee, it is possible that there would be people still alive who knew him. We should check and see if he has any relatives or friends that are still alive that we could talk to. Can we find copies of his newspaper? If so, we should try to read some and get an idea of what he was writing. How about calling the Oklahoma History Center? Dunjee was from Oklahoma City, which is where the museum is located. Perhaps they have information on him. Look for museums, libraries, and archives near where the person lived or the event happened. They can be very helpful! Leave no stone unturned and ask for help. Also, don't forget to keep detailed notes on everything that you are reading. Use the organizational system that you created and stick to it!

A note on sources: Before using any source in your research, you need to evaluate its reliability and validity. This is especially true of Internet sources. Sites such as Wikipedia are NEVER to be considered reliable sources and should NOT appear in your bibliography.

Likely to be a reliable source:

- Written by a scholar
- Published by a reputable publishing company or written by a trustworthy author (i.e., a university, a government document, a historical society, etc.)
- Well documented
- Seems balanced and fair
- Written by a government
- Used by a reputable secondary source
- Well reviewed by a valid institution or knowledgeable person

If you come across a source that fails to meet one or more of the above standards, you may have an unreliable source. If you really feel that this source is one you need to use, please consult your teacher or ask an expert before using this source in your project.

Check out the student resources available on the OkNHD website. Resources are arranged by subject matter, making databases and archives easy to find!

To be responsible researchers, students must credit sources from which they gathered information. To begin the process, however, it is important for the student to collect critical information from each source as they read, including the author's name, title, publisher, date of publication, and page number for quotes.

Citations/Bibliographies

To record information, the two acceptable styles of writing for NHD projects are Turabian/Chicago and MLA. Historians use Turabian/Chicago but we know that many classes in middle school and high school teach the MLA style. It does not matter which of these two styles the student uses, but it is important to be consistent. For help with questions about citations, you can check Turabian/Chicago or MLA guides from your local library.

Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is required for all categories. The annotations for each source must explain how the source was used and how it helped the student understand the topic. The student should also use the annotation to explain why the source was categorized as primary or secondary. Historians do sometimes disagree, and there's not always one correct answer, so students should use the annotation to explain why they classified their sources as they did. Students should list only those sources used to develop their entry. An annotation usually should be about one to three sentences.

- Source example:
Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*. 1st ed. New York: David McKay Co. Inc., 1962.
- Annotation example:
Daisy Bates was the president of the Arkansas NAACP and the one who met and listened to the students each day. The firsthand account was very important to my paper because it made me more aware of the feelings of the people involved.

Step 6: Analyzing and Interpreting Sources and the Topic's Significance in History

Historians do more than describe events. They analyze and interpret information gathered from their sources to draw conclusions about the topic's significance in history. Students should do the same. Ask questions about your topic and research, considering the following:

- Elements of change and continuity
- Historical context: economic, political, social, and cultural atmosphere of the period

Practice interrogating your sources:

- Who created the source?
- When was the source created?
- What was the intent or purpose of the source?

During your History Day project, you will be asked to analyze sources, not simply to summarize them. While this may not seem like a big difference to you right now, interpretation is a critical aspect of writing like a true historian. Here is a basic example of the difference between summarization and interpretation.

You read:

The dog saw the cat. The dog chased the cat. The cat got away.

You summarize:

The dog saw the cat and chased after it, but the cat got away.

You interpret:

The dog wants to catch the cat, but the cat is scared of the dog and is faster than the dog.

This is a simple example, but as historians, we want to read more than just the words written on a piece of paper. We need to ask questions and think like the writer or decision-makers being studied to truly interpret a source. As you read each of your sources, ask yourself these questions.

For a document:

- Who wrote this?
- When?
- Why did they write this document?

- Could this writer have had ulterior motives for creating this source? (i.e., to make themselves look good, bolster confidence, undermine someone or something else, etc.)
- What is the author trying to say? Do they make an effective argument?

For an artifact:

- Who created this?
- How do I know?
- When?
- Why did they create this?
- What is it made of?
- What might it have been used for?
- What type of people would have used this?

For a photograph:

- Who took this photograph and why?
- What does the photograph depict? Are the subjects of the photograph posing or is this an action/live shot?
- When was this taken?
- What can I infer about what is happening in this photograph?

For a sound/video recording:

- When was this recording made? If the recording doesn't explicitly say, look for clues like sound or video quality and what the speaker is talking about.
- Who/what is the subject?
- Who is the speaker?
- Where was this recording made?
- What type of recording is this?
- Is there anything unique or special about this recording?

General questions:

- How did this source affect the future?
- Was this source influenced by prior events/figures? Think about how this source fits into the timeline of your topic.
- Who was the intended audience? Was there an unintended audience?
- How does this source fit into what I already know about this subject?
- What does this source tell me about my topic that I don't already know?
- Is this source similar to other sources that I have found on my topic? Why or why not?
- Did this source answer any of my research questions? Did it leave me with unanswered questions?
- What sorts of biases does the author/creator have?
- Does their point of view alter how you should think about what they are saying?

When evaluating each source, you also need to think about if the source's information really fits into your project. So often, researchers come across an interesting story, or a humorous anecdote that almost, but doesn't quite, fit into their overall narrative. Although these tidbits of information may be tempting to include, doing so will distract your audience and weaken your project. Focus on developing your key points, and include information related to those points. Don't waste your time or word count trying to include too much.

Finally, a key part of interpreting your sources is synthesizing information. You need to figure out how each source relates to one another and fits into the overall picture.

When considering your sources as a whole, look for:

- Relationships between sources
- Change/continuity over time: look for ways that sources are similar or different based upon when they were written
- Different perspectives on the same topic
- As you work on your project make a list of different perspectives that you want to include—for example: a project on the land run might need to include the perspectives of the settlers, the US government, and American Indians

Interpreting and analyzing sources can be a difficult concept to understand and even harder to put into practice. Even experts have trouble with this sometimes! Don't be afraid to ask for help or advice. Be patient with yourself and keep trying!

Step 7: Developing a Thesis

The thesis statement is usually one sentence that presents an argument about the topic. The body of a paper or website, script of a performance or documentary, and the headings and captions in an exhibit are used to support the thesis using evidence from your research.

This step is certainly one of the most critical to the success of your History Day project. A thesis statement is the central argument or key point of your project and can make or break an entry.

A thesis statement should:

- Address a narrow topic
- Explain the significance of your topic
- Makes a claim or takes a stand that you will argue in the rest of your project
- Be supported by your sources
- Connect the topic to the NHD theme
- Be clear and concisely written and easily found by the audience
- Answer the question: why is this topic significant?

For more information on thesis development and examples of good theses, check out our [Guide to Thesis Development](#).

Step 8: Finalizing a NHD Research Project

When research is completed and ready to present to an audience, review whether your work includes:

- Analysis and interpretation
- Significance and impact
- In-depth research
- Historical accuracy
- Historical context
- Adherence to the theme

After you have completed the first seven steps, the only thing left to do is to put your project together. Make sure you include your thesis statement in your project and that it is obvious to the audience. Judges will be scoring your project based solely on the materials you present at the contest. You may have done the best research in your whole division, but if you fail to communicate that information, then it does not matter. Read and re-read your material to make sure that you explain your project thoroughly. By the end of your research, you will be very familiar with your topic and its significance, but your audience may not be experts on the subject. Be sure to include all relevant information, even if you think it might be very basic. At this point, you will see all of your hard work pay off!

Thank you to National History Day for its *A Guide to Historical Research through the National History Day Program*, which was used in the writing of this guide.