

Eight Steps to Historical Research

The following is excerpted from *A Guide to Historical Research Through the National History Day Program*. A team of ten veteran teachers provides their best practices in managing National History Day (NHD) in the classroom. The book is formatted to take teachers step-by-step through a school year, from topic selection to research presentation complete with ready-to-use worksheets.

Step 1: Developing a Paperwork Management System

Organization is a key factor in successful research. The teacher should encourage students in the beginning stage of research to select a paperwork management system.

Step 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.

Step 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 support students in reading widely about their topic. Look at several different history books about the time period in which the topic takes place.

Step 4: Narrowing Your Topic

Selecting a National History Day topic is a process of gradually narrowing the area of history (period or event) that interests the students. For example, if the student is 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 the student expressed an interest in women’s rights and the theme is the “Individual in History,” the student might consider voting rights. After a library search and reading several texts about the era, the students 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

Or if a student is interested in science and the theme is “Innovation in History,” the student might 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

Step 5: Gathering and Recording Information

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 right 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 normally 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. Therefore, teachers should help students to ask questions about their topic and research, considering the following:

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

Encourage students to interrogate their sources:

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

Step 7: Developing a Thesis

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

A good thesis statement:

- Addresses a narrow topic
- Explains what the researcher believes to be the historical significance of the topic
- Connects the topic to the National History Day theme

Step 8: Finalizing a NHD Research Project

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

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