

Tackling the Theme: “Communication in History”

National History Day 2021

The 2021 theme for National History Day, “Communication in History: The Key to Understanding,” is broad enough that it can be applied to any historical setting you are interested in. The most important thing when choosing a topic for the contest is that it interests you! National History Day demands significant time and effort from its participants, so it will be much easier if you are excited about the topic you have chosen.

Communication may seem like an easy idea to understand, but you will want to consider all of the different ideas that the theme could include. There are many different ways to think of communication within your History Day project. You might immediately think of language as central to our understanding of communication. How might a shared language affect a group’s ability to communicate? What about the lack of a shared language? Languages constantly evolve and fall out of use, whether by force or by choice. How might this process of evolution and disuse change the way people communicate? You might also consider the difference between private forms of communication such as letter writing and more public formats including newspaper articles, presidential addresses, and more. Who is the subject of these different types of communication? What might be their goal? Communication might also include a wide variety of images and imagery. For instance, what does the music created during a period of time communicate about that era and the place it was made? Considering questions such as these makes it much easier to develop a History Day project that connects clearly to the theme.

When choosing a topic, start big: think about a time period or place that is especially interesting to you. Consider how communication, or miscommunication, might have played an important role in this setting. Once you have chosen a period or place, narrow your topic further. Maybe there is a specific event you have always wanted to learn about. Is there a historical group or figure that was important to our understanding of communication in this setting?

2021 is the eightieth anniversary of the development of the Comanche-language code used during World War II by the Comanche Code Talkers. If you are interested in this topic, work on narrowing your focus further. Why did some American Indian languages prove so successful when used as a coded language by the American military? Which campaigns did the Code Talkers serve in? Why? Make sure you identify key figures and the methods they used to ensure effective communication on the battlefield.

Once you’ve selected a topic, you need to create a thesis or main idea for your project. Use the **thesis development worksheet** to develop your thesis statement. Following our Comanche Code Talkers example, a sample thesis might be: “Comanche Code Talkers established clear lines of communication between soldiers in combat and higher-ranking military officers because their native language remained unintelligible to enemy listeners, which allowed American soldiers to react to and take advantage of military opportunities quickly.”

Once you choose a topic, and you have begun to work on your thesis, the next step is to establish a connection between your project and this year’s theme. Consider your topic from multiple perspectives.

Check out our website, www.okhistory.org/historyday, for more resources to help with your project!

