

Communication in History: The Key to Understanding

The 2021 National History Day theme will connect to topics from every part of the world and area of history. The theme may inspire you to think about major inventions— like the television and internet – but communication is so much more than that.

By definition, communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” Throughout history, we can find stories of people, groups or nations communicating or failing to communicate with one another.

Communication is Spoken

Before the printing press, societies passed down oral traditions and stories. There are more than five thousand languages spoken around the world today. However, not all languages are spoken. For example, you could ask how American Sign Language has contributed to both cultural and linguistic diversity.

- *Beginning in the 18th century, millions of Germans migrated to Ohio. They often lived and worked in communities alongside others who spoke their native language. Why might they have chosen to do so? Did their language barrier make it harder for immigrants to communicate effectively and adjust to life in the United States?*

Communication is also heard and received. Before television, most American families listened to the radio to hear news, dramas like Orson Welles’ *The War of the Worlds*, and music. What impact did the radio have on how American people received information?

Communication is Written

Much of history is preserved in the written records of those who came before us. Their letters, diaries, and books give us insight to the past. How were letters used as a means of communication? What did people write about in diaries? How did the mass production of books and other printed materials help shape society?

- *The Franklin County Woman Suffrage Association was essential in helping suffragists in smaller Ohio counties and cities campaign locally. Women across the state of Ohio often wrote to the FCWSA’s secretary to request materials in support of suffrage such as leaflets, posters, ribbons, buttons, and more. How did the production and distribution of these materials play a significant role in the passage of the 19th Amendment in Ohio?*

Newspapers are often a key part of historical research. There are many ways in which newspapers have had an impact in history. How were newspapers used to influence politics, debates, and opinions? To learn more and search newspapers from across the nation, check out [Chronicling America](http://ChroniclingAmerica), accessible at chroniclingamerica.loc.gov.

- *Historically, African American’s had little representation at World’s Fairs, especially those that took place in the United States. In 1939, African Americans were invited to create an exhibit for one week only. What can newspapers like the Dayton Forum tell us about African American participation at the fair? How does this fit within the larger context of American race relations on the eve of the Second World War? To learn more, check out our [lesson plan](#).*

The Key to Understanding

Communication, in and of itself, is defined by the exchange of ideas, news, or information. Yet, there is another side to communication. Do we understand what is told to us? Information is extremely important, but if we fail to get our point across or miscommunicate the information, it often leads to unintended results.

The Role of Miscommunication

History also shows us the dangers of the lack of communication, miscommunication and misunderstanding. These can also provide us with key moments for historical study. What happens when we do not understand the intended message? How has miscommunication or failure to communicate shaped history?

- *The Toledo war (early 1800s) is one of the first instances of a rivalry between Ohio and Michigan. The war was fought over a strip of land nicknamed “The Toledo Strip” which both Michigan and Ohio claimed was theirs. How were each states borders defined and communicated? What consequences arose as a result?*

Communication is a Many-Sided Effort

It is often challenging to communicate in times of conflict, but history shows us the importance of this communication. Be sure to consider how different groups of people received and understood information. Look for multiple viewpoints throughout the project: before, during, and after. Also consider which sources you are using for your research. Have you looked for sources to help understand multiple points of view?

- *In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which granted the president authority to negotiate Indian removal treaties. This impacted many tribes in Ohio, including the Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee, Ottawa and Wyandot. Looking at this story from the perspective of only the American politicians would represent just part of the story. By researching accounts by American Indians, we bring their voices into the fold to understand how they faced the crisis of removal, as well as get a more rounded account of the event.*