

Theme and Thesis Statements

Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History 2026

TEACHER GUIDE

AUDIENCE

Grades 4-12

TIME

80 minutes (or two 40-minute blocks)

STANDARDS

Social Studies: Grade 4:

C.S. 1, C.S. 2, C.S. 15,

C.S. 16, C.S. 17, C.S. 18

Grade 5: C.S. 1, C.S. 11

Grade 6: C.S. 9, C.S. 12

Grade 7: C.S. 1, C.S. 16

Grade 8: C.S. 1, C.S. 20,

C.S. 22, C.S. 23

American History: C.S. 1,

C.S. 2, C.S. 3, C.S. 4, C.S.

6

American Government:

C.S. 3, C.S. 6, C.S. 8, C.S.

10, C.S. 11, C.S. 14, C.S.

15

Modern World History:

C.S. 1, C.S. 2, C.S. 3

Contemporary World

Issues: C.S. 8, C.S. 9, C.S.

10

English Language Arts:

Grades 3-5: R.L. 4.1, R.L.

5.1, R.I. 4.1, R.I. 5.1, R.I.

4.2, R.I. 5.2, R.I. 4.3, R.I.

5.3, W. 4.2, W.5.2

Grades 6-8: R.L. 6.1, R.L.

7.1, R.L. 8.1, R.I. 6.1, R.I.

7.1, R.I. 8.1, R.I. 6.2, R.I.

7.2, R.I. 8.2, R.I. 6.3, R.I.

7.3, R.I. 8.3, W.6.2, W.7.2,

W.8.2

Grades 9-10: R.L. 9-10.1,

R.I. 9-10.1, R.I. 9-10.2,

R.I. 9-10.3, W.9-10.2

Grades 11-12: R.L. 11-

12.1, R.I. 11-12.1, R.I. 11-

12.2, R.I. 11-12.3, W.11-

12.2

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Introduction

In this lesson plan, students will unpack the 2026 National History Day theme of Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History. Students will walk away from this lesson with an understanding of the definitions of revolution reaction, reform, how these ideas are interconnected, and brainstormed topic ideas. The lesson will help students to think through how a topic that interests them can demonstrate this theme and will begin to build out the backbone of their History Day project: their thesis statement.

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand the definition of a revolution and be able to name examples of revolutions.
- Students will understand the definition of a reaction and be able to give examples of reactions.
- Students will understand the definition of a reform and be able to name examples of reforms.
- Students will brainstorm ideas for research topics that connect to the theme.
- Students will be able to identify the parts that make up a strong thesis statement.

Materials

- Teacher guide
- [NHD Theme Video](#)
- [NHD 2026 Theme Brainstorm Sheet](#)
- 2026 Revolution, Reaction, Reform Theme Graphic Organizer (teacher guide included at the back)

Vocabulary

Revolution	"The forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system," or "a dramatic and wide-reaching change in the way something works or is organized or in people's ideas about it."
Reaction	"An action performed, or a feeling experienced in response to a situation or event; the resistance or opposition to a force or movement."
Reform	"The effort to change to a better state or form; to improve by alteration, substitution, abolition."
Theme	The main subject being discussed or described
Thesis Statement	The central or main idea of a research project that identifies a claim about a topic

Program Outline

Pre-Activity 1: NHD Theme Overview

- I. Announce to your class that you will be beginning a project that combines social studies, research, reading, and writing to create an end product of their choice to showcase their learning. You can mention the options for their end product here (Paper, Exhibit, Documentary, Website, or Performance). The National History Day project has many levels of competition, and all students compete using the same theme and rubrics. The theme for this year's project is Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History. Tell students they will be learning more about this theme by viewing the Theme Video. Have students listen to be able to answer these two questions:
 - Why are the ideas revolution, reaction, and reform like a set of dominoes?
 - What are examples of each?
- II. Play the video for students. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0UKT2ln1fo> (9:24). Pause the video at 3:17. Have students share out what they learned to be a revolution.
- III. Resume the video until 5:11. Have students review what they learned to be a reaction.
- IV. Resume the video until 6:40. Have students discuss what a reform is and examples.
- V. Continue playing the video and listen to the examples NHD has provided from history.

Discussion: What are revolutions, reactions, and reforms? How are they like a set of dominoes?

- Distinctions between revolutions, reactions, and reforms are sometimes blurred. Revolutions and reforms are often reactions to ideas, actions or events. In turn, revolutions and reforms inspire reactions.
 - Like a domino effect, knock one down and then the next which sets off a chain reaction that can transform societies ideologies.
- B. Hold a discussion about some of the open-ended questions posed in the video. These are meant to get students thinking and will not have "right" answers.
- What ideas led to revolution?
 - Who reacted to or was affected by a revolution or movement?
 - Did the revolution result in reform? How? Why or why not?

Pre-Activity 2: Examples of Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in History

- I. Pass out the NHD 2026 Theme Brainstorm sheet. Use this worksheet to facilitate a conversation about different examples of each theme term and how in many cases they overlap. We suggest reviewing the definitions and coming up with one example of each as a whole group
- II. You have the option to then let students work independently or with a partner to come up with a second example for each.
 - a. It is important to note that the charge for students from NHD is that they do not have to include all three aspects/ideas in their projects, however if the topic they select involves all three, then students should be sure to include all three

(If choosing to break this lesson into two days, STOP here.)



Main Activity: Brainstorming Topics and Thesis Statements

- I. Pass out the 2026 Revolution, Reaction, Reform Theme Graphic Organizer. Use the Teacher Guide example to walk students through filling out the top section of the organizer.
 - a. Theme: Revolution, Reaction, Reform
 - b. General Topic/Interest
 - c. Narrow Topic
- II. Give students time to brainstorm as many Narrow Topic ideas as possible. Encourage students to think about P.I.E.s (People, Places, Ideas, and Events) connected to their General Topic/Interest.
- III. In the boxes on the back of the organizer, the goal is for students to select ONE Narrow topic idea and think through how the topic is connected to revolution, reaction, and reform (or some combination of two aspects).
- IV. Review the importance of a thesis statement. The thesis statement will be the road map for their entire project. As the NHD theme this year is very broad, it will be extra important for students to select a narrow topic that addresses clearly an aspect of the theme.
- V. Use the thesis statement on the Teacher Guide as an example to show students how to include background information, immediate impact, and long-term significance. The students have space to work on brainstorming these parts for their own topic idea as well.
- VI. Encourage students to take their time with this process. They might even try out multiple narrow topic ideas before landing on one that they like best.



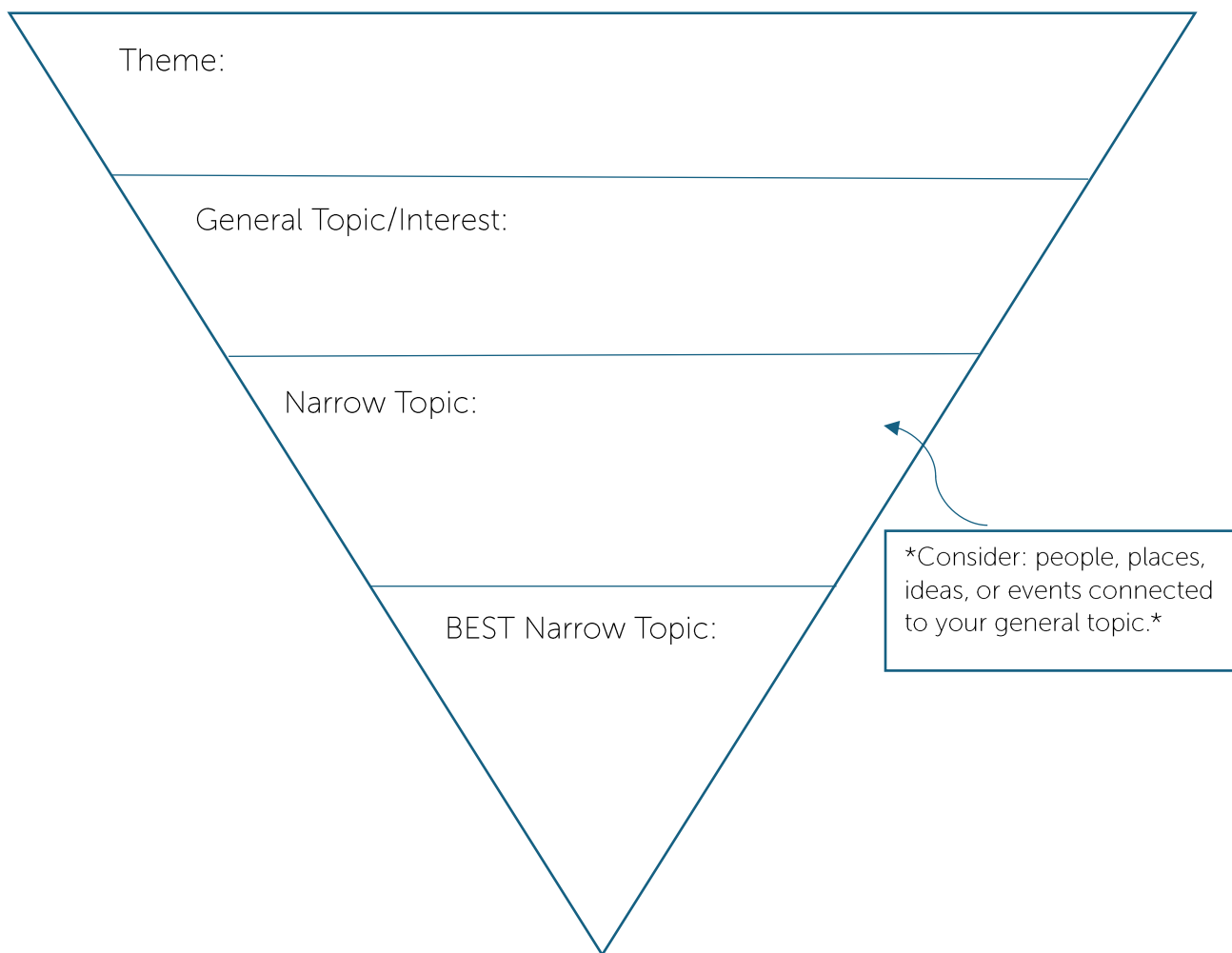


2026 Theme Graphic Organizer: Revolution, Reaction, Reform

The distinctions among revolutions, reactions, and reforms are sometimes blurred.

Revolutions and reforms are often reactions to ideas, actions, or events; in turn, revolutions and reforms inspire reactions. Think of it as a domino effect—knock one down, which knocks the next one down, which knocks . . . Most revolutions and reform movements are too large and complex for an NHD student research project. Rather

than attempting to research and analyze an entire revolution or movement (and the related reactions and reforms), look for more manageable topics associated with it. Let's use the funnel graphic organizer below to help us narrow down our ideas.



Now, consider your BEST narrow topic idea. Is it an example of a revolutionary event, idea or person? What are the reactions to that revolution? Could your idea be considered a reform movement, era, or idea? What ideas led to revolution? Who reacted to or was affected by a revolution or movement? Did the revolution result in reform? How?

Why or why not?

Determine which theme aspects your topic applies. Circle the terms you think your topic addresses.

Revolution

Reform

Reaction

Your thesis statement needs to include the words that you believe your addresses.

Your thesis statement should include:

background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background:

Revolution, Reaction, Reform:

Immediate Impact:

Long-Term Significance:

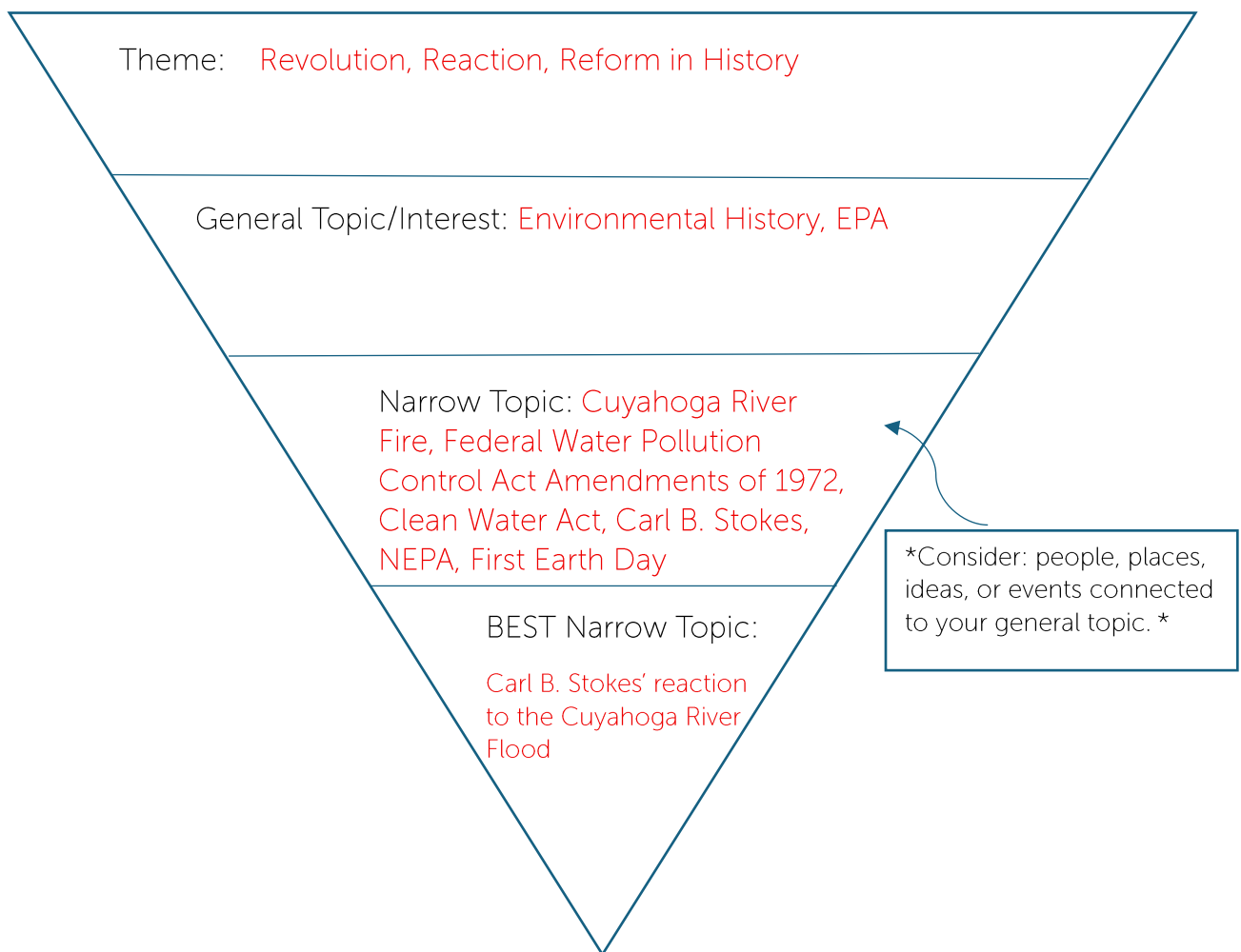
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Why or why not?

Determine if your topic idea addresses all three aspects of the 2026 theme, two, one etc. Circle the terms you think your topic addresses.

Revolution

Reform

Reaction

Your thesis statement needs to include the words that you believe your project connects to.

Your thesis statement should include:

background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background: In 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Ohio became so polluted that it caught fire. While this was not the first time,

Revolution, Reaction, Reform: Cleveland Mayor Carl B. Stokes called attention to the need for environmental reform.

Immediate Impact: This drew immediate reactions from the state and federal governments, local industries and community members.

Long-Term Significance: By bringing national attention to water pollution issues, Carl B. Stokes' actions contributed to the creation of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

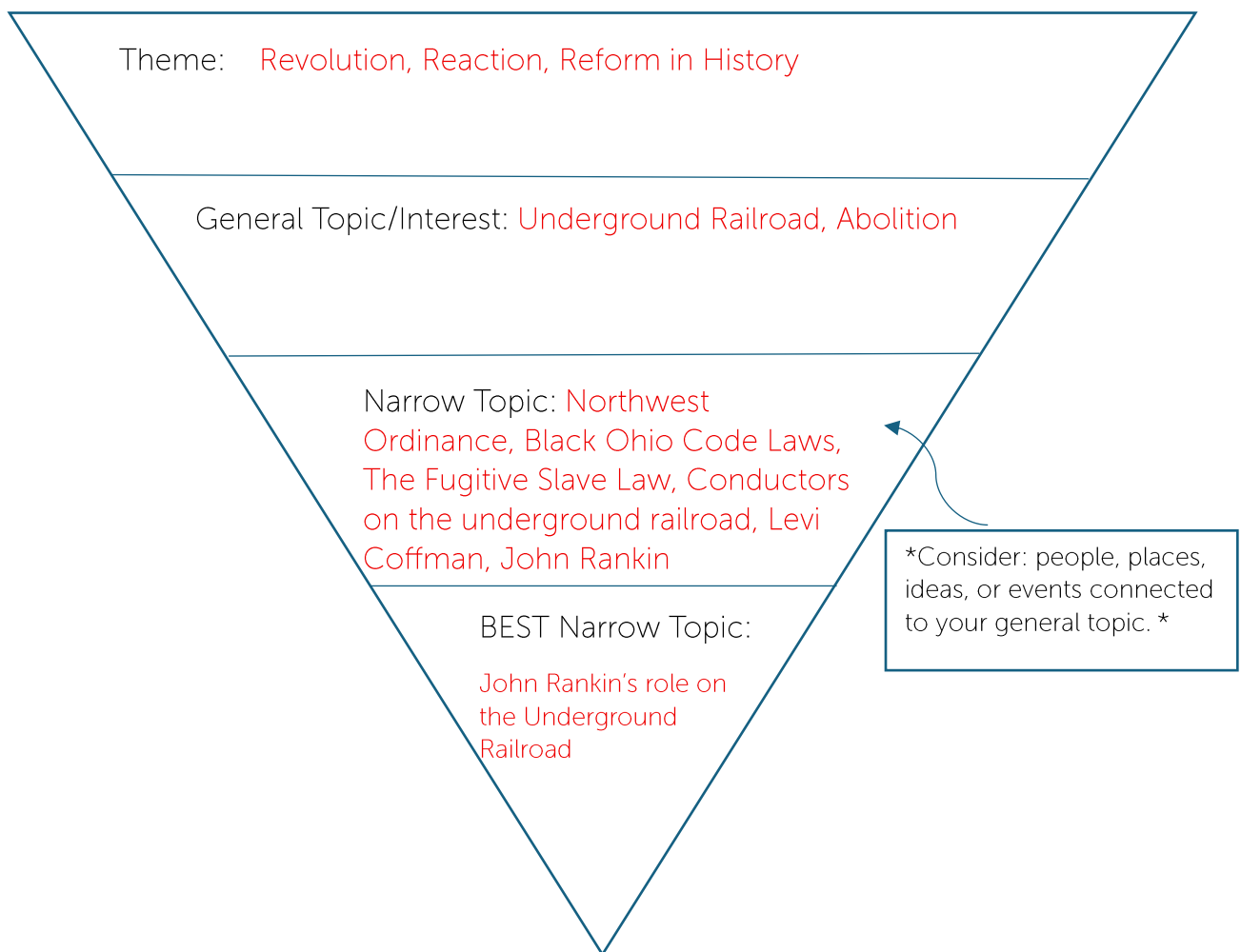
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background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background: For over 200 years, slavery was legal in the United States

Revolution, Reaction, Reform: John Rankin's revolutionary ideas surrounding abolition and the right to freedom for all lead to his commitment to helping enslaved people escape via the Underground Railroad, despite the danger and reactions he would face.

Immediate Impact: Rankin and his wife were able to help 2,000 people escape slavery.

Long-Term Significance: John Rankin represented Ohioans in the abolitionist movement that eventually led to the passing of the 13th amendment.