



Navigating Youth History Day 2026

**A quick guide to almost everything you need to know
to kick off your History Day adventure!**

Student Name

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Getting Started

What is History Day?

History Day is not your normal class project. History Day lets you do the work of a real historian. You choose your topic, study primary sources, think about what you've found, and come up with your own ideas. The best part about History Day? You decide how you want to share your research: an exhibit or a performance.

The History Day Theme

Every History Day Project must follow a theme. There is a different theme each school year. The theme helps you focus your research. Topics can be about something local or from around the world. They can be about something far in the past or more recent. You get to choose!

2026 Theme – Revolution, Reform, Reaction in History



This year's National History Day theme allows you to look at topics from all over the world and in many areas of study. As you dive deeper into your research, you'll find that this is a complex and thought-provoking theme. We've broken down this year's theme to help you choose a topic and begin your research.

What is a revolution?

We can think of a revolution as **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, is organized, or in people's ideas about it.**

Sometimes, revolutions involve a change in government, like the American Revolution. Other revolutions are about changing the way society views certain people, practices or social norms. And some revolutions are about changing the way society, or a specific group of people, do something, like the mechanization of production during the Industrial Revolution or the Scientific Revolution that led to new knowledge about our natural world.

What is a reform?

The effort to change to a better state or form; to improve by alteration, substitution, or abolition (removal). Reform is all about changing the way something works.

Reform can include change to the way we do things, like the invention of the oral Polio vaccine. It can also be about substituting or swapping something out, like when the Founding Fathers wrote the U.S. Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation. Reform can also be about the outright removal or end of something, like the abolition of slavery.

What is a reaction?

An action performed or a feeling experienced in response to a situation or event; or the resistance or opposition to a force or movement. Reaction is all about how people respond to something that happens.

Reaction can take many forms. Sometimes reactions are limited to verbal or written responses, like a newspaper opinion piece against something. Other times, reactions take on a more active or organized role, like staging a protest or organizing a letter writing campaign.

There is always a reaction to a revolution or reform. People will always have a response to change. Reaction can also lead to revolution and reform.

Choosing a Topic

One of your first steps in History Day will be choosing a **topic** to research. Here are some things to think about in choosing a topic for History Day.

- **Interest.** You will spend a lot of time researching, thinking, and writing about your topic, so make sure it's something you want to learn more about!
- **Theme.** Remember, your topic needs to connect to the History Day theme.
- **Available Information.** For some topics, it can be hard to find primary sources. This can be especially true of really old topics, little known topics, or topics where most of the information is in a different language.
- **Your topic has historical significance.** In a strong History Day project, you'll need to be able to show how your topic was important in history. This doesn't mean you need to do your project on something world-famous. Even local topics can change history!

*Use the worksheet on the next page to
start brainstorming your YHD topic!*

WORKSHEET: TOPIC BRAINSTORM

Topics can come from many different places. Answer the questions in each box to find topics that interest you. Then see if you can fit any of them into this year's theme.

Who are some people from history that you admire? (ex. George Washington, Tecumseh, Thomas Edison)?

Do you have any hobbies that you want to learn more about the history of (ex. music, art, sports, video games)?

What era of history have you always wanted to know more about (ex. Prehistoric America, Colonial America, the Civil War)?

What movements would you like to know more about (Women's Rights, Abolition, westward expansion)?

What famous invention have you wondered about (ex. the light bulb, the telephone, the airplane)?

What historical events are you interested in (ex. The Revolutionary War, the sinking of the Titanic, Moon Landing)?

What place or region in the world do you want to visit?

Is there a piece of family or local history you'd like to explore?

Narrowing your Topic

Great, now you have a potential research topic! Let's explore how to narrow it to a smaller topic. As you begin your research, you might find that there's a ton of information on a subject. All History Day projects have a word or time limit. This means you need to focus your project to fit everything in. This will also help you write a strong thesis statement. See an example on how to narrow your topic in the topic funnel below.



WORKSHEET: TOPIC NARROWING FUNNEL

Using the funnels below, try narrowing down two of your general interests into more focused topics. [Google Docs](#). [PDF](#).

THEME

Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History

GENERAL INTEREST

BROAD TOPIC

NARROW TOPIC

THEME

GENERAL INTEREST

BROAD TOPIC

NARROW TOPIC

Finding Information

No matter what topic you choose, it all starts with research! Let's review the types of sources you should look for, how to find them, and how to keep good notes.

Primary & Secondary Sources

When historians study a topic, they try to gather many different kinds of sources. Historians divide their sources in two groups: **Primary** and **Secondary**. You are going to need to use both types of sources for a good History Day project.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are written by someone who did not see or take part in an event. Most books, encyclopedias, and websites are secondary sources. Secondary sources are useful because they can give background about your topic. The footnotes and bibliographies of secondary sources can also lead you to primary sources.

Examples of Secondary Sources

- Biographies
- Encyclopedias
- History Textbooks
- Media Documentaries
- Books about the Topic
- Interviews with scholars/ experts
- Articles about the topic
- Websites

Primary Sources

Primary Sources are items that give first-hand account about a person or event. A primary source might be something written or made during the time you are studying. It could also be a written or recorded interview with a person who lived through a historical event.

Examples of Primary Sources

- Historic Objects
- Manuscript Collections
- Interview with Eyewitnesses
- Autobiographies
- Government Records
- Newspapers from the Era
- Letters
- Photographs
- Music of the Era
- Original Film Footage

Research & Finding Sources

To be able to use your research later, you need to decide on a way to organize it. You should think about:

1. How and where you're going to look for information.
2. What you'll do to record what you find.

Where should I start?

A good place to start is in your school library. The librarian there can help you find trustworthy sources to help get you on the right track. Here are some other places to check out:

- **City, County, or College Libraries.** These libraries have more resources than school libraries. They are especially helpful because they may have primary sources, such as old newspapers.
- **Historical Societies.** If your topic is on Ohio history, a historical society may be helpful. State and local historical societies focus on collecting stories about Ohio. Some historical societies and archives also have special collections that relate to national topics.
- **Historical Sites.** If your topic is local, you may be able to visit the place where it happened. Historical sites let you see what it was like during the time period. You may also be able to see objects and pictures from the time which can help you understand the who, what, and why of your topic.
- **Interviews.** If people connected to your topic are still living, you can interview them for an oral history. Contact the person you want to interview to set up a time and place to meet. Write your questions beforehand and be prepared to take notes or record the interview. If you cannot meet in person you can send those questions in the mail, by e-mail, over the phone, or by video chat. Make sure to send a thank you note to them after the interview.
 - Keep in mind, interviews are not required for History Day projects.
 - **Important Rules to Consider:** If you are able to, and interview with a person who lived through or has first-hand experience with your topic can be a fantastic source. However, do not interview a professional historian about your topic. Any information you may get in an interview is most likely already in the historian's books and other published materials. It is your job to find and read those instead.

Using the Internet for History Day Research

The internet is a helpful tool for starting your History Day research. You can use the internet to gather general information, narrow your topic, and find some primary sources.

Sites like the [Library of Congress](#), [the Digital Public Library](#), and [Ohio Memory](#) are good examples of trustworthy websites that have many primary sources. You can also use the internet to take a look at library and archive collections before you visit.

Be Careful!

There are a lot of websites that do not have good information. You should check anything you read on a website against at least one other source.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself about websites:

- What is this site about?
- Who made the site?
- Where did they get their information from?
- When was this site made?
- Is the information on this page accurate? Can I double-check with another secondary source?

Research Plan & Staying Organized

Information is only useful if you can find and use it later. One way to organize your research is to use note cards. Here are examples of index cards for a citation and research notes about journalist Nellie Bly.

Gropo, Martha. "Uncovering Nellie Bly."

***Kaleidoscope* 10.41 (2012): 1-12. Print.**

This source is a peer-reviewed article published in the University of Kentucky journal, *Kaleidoscope*. This is a biography about Nellie and specifically mentions information about her detractors. I will use this source to talk about her detractors in my paper.

Bibliography Cards track the sources you used. Fill these out as you use each source. It will make your life easier when you create your bibliography later.

Nellie Bly's career as an investigative reporter

Nellie Bly was one of the first female investigative reporters and went to great strides to make her case to the reader.

"Bly's investigative journalism captured the minds and hearts of her readers" (Stevens)

Note Cards track your notes, ideas, and quote

Note: This is only one way to organize information. If you have another way that works for you ([NoodleTools](#), Google Docs, a notebook etc.) that's great! As long as you choose a strategy and stick to it so that when it comes time to put your project together, you have all the information you need in one place.

RESEARCH NOTES ORGANIZER

Use the sheet below to organize information you get from your sources. Use one sheet per source. [Google Doc](#). [PDF](#).

Author/ Creator :

Type of Source (Book, Website, Article Etc.):

Title:

Briefly describe the source and what information it contains:

Name of Publication:

Date Published :

Publisher :

City Published In:

URL:

What did you learn from this source?:

Write any quotes you want to save and include the location (page number, website heading, video minute):

Write the page number or webpage title of any images or other materials you might use in your Project:

Research Questions and Historical Arguments

For a History Day project to be successful, you need to do more than report the facts about your topic. You need to come up with and share **your own ideas**. To do this you'll ask **Research Questions** and create a **Historical Argument** (also called a Thesis Statement).

Writing Research Questions

Like any good detective, you have to have the right questions to guide your research. Good research questions allow you to investigate cause and effect, change over time, and differences in perspective. What were the causes of past events? What were the effects? How did past decisions or actions affect future choices? What has changed since?

- **Research questions are different than fact-finding questions.** Fact finding questions helps you to understand the basic facts about your topic. You can answer these questions by reading an encyclopedia article about your topic. Here are some examples of fact-finding questions:
 - When was the 19th amendment passed?
 - Who was the first president of the United States?
 - How does a bill become a law?
- **Ask questions as you research.** As you begin looking at sources, write down any questions that come to mind. For instance, once you learn the basic facts related to the 19th amendment, you might still be curious about certain things. Why was the 19th amendment passed in 1919? How was women's role in society viewed at the time? What effects did the 19th amendment have on American politics, society, and culture? Did the passing of the 19th amendment impact all women? These open-ended questions will guide further research and may give you an idea of what primary sources to look for.
- **Develop your historical argument (also known as a thesis statement) from your research questions.** As you find sources that relate to your research questions, carefully think about what the information is telling you. Then, after careful analysis, try to come up with **your own** answers to your question based on that evidence. This will be the basis for your historical argument. We will talk more about this in the next section.
- **Research is an ongoing process.** Research doesn't stop as soon as you have a historical argument. As you find more information, develop your argument, and revise your project, you may change your research questions or develop new ones.

WORKSHEET: WRITING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Directions: This worksheet should be done after you've started your research. In Part I: Write down what you know and what you want to know about your topic. In Part II you will brainstorm some research questions using the prompts. [Google Doc](#). [PDF](#).

Your Topic:

What I know

Write down some things you already know about your topic through your research. This will give you good context to come up with questions.

What I want to know

Write as many questions as you can, related to your topic. Mark each question with a "C" for Closed (the question can be answered with a quick google search), or "O" for Open (you need more research and multiple sources to answer your question).

Part II: Remember, a good historical question will help you investigate your topic's cause and effect, multiple perspectives, and the short- and long-term impacts. Brainstorm some questions to about your topic. Use two or three of these questions to help guide your further research.

Category	Example: John Rankin	Research Questions for Your Topic
<p>Causes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What caused the main event? • What were the people, ideas, and events that impacted your topic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What major abolitionist movements and figures were important at this time? ➤ How did the Underground Railroad work and who was involved? 	
<p>Short-term Effects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • Did anything change right away? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What criticisms or opposition did Rankin face from those who supported slavery? ➤ Were there any immediate changes in the local or national abolitionist movement due to Rankin's work, particularly in the Ohio-Kentucky border region? 	
<p>Multiple Perspectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were the different groups involved in your topic? • What were the different ideas on your topic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How did the political and social tension between pro-slavery and anti-slavery states affect Rankin and Ohio? 	
<p>Long-term Effects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your topic change history? • How are things different because of your topic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In what ways did Rankin's abolitionist work influence later events, such as the Civil War or the passing of the 13th Amendment? ➤ How did Rankin's actions shape the abolitionist movement in Ohio and beyond, and what lasting impact did they have on the region? 	

The Historical Argument (Your Thesis)

A historical argument is a claim about your topic's significance in history. This argument, also sometimes called a thesis or main idea, will be what you build the rest of your project around. A good historical argument should be able to **be argued against**. Someone has to be able to reasonably take a different point of view than you on the topic. For example, no one could argue *"The Union won the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863"* but someone might argue *"The Battle of Gettysburg was the most important factor in the Union winning the Civil War"*.

Examples:

1. *"John Rankin played an important role in the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad."*
 - This introduces the topic to the reader, but does not make an argument as to why the topic is historically significant.
2. *"John Rankin wanted reform to end slavery and advocated for the rights of enslaved people through his work on the Underground Railroad."*
 - This makes an argument, but it still does not show historical significance. It does not explain *why* John Rankin and abolitionists were important.
3. *"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."*
 - This thesis makes an argument for why this topic is historically significant. It can be supported by evidence from primary and secondary sources. It clearly states the connection to the theme by using words from the theme itself.

Remember to Include the Historical Context. Nothing in history happened by itself. Every topic was shaped by the people, ideas, or events that came before it. The impacts of every topic went on to shape other people, ideas, and events. This relationship of a topic to the environment surrounding it is called **historical context**.

WORKSHEET: CRAFTING MY THESIS MAD LIBS

Directions: Once you've started your beginning topic research, fill out Steps 1 and 2. You should complete Steps 3 and 4 after you've done additional secondary source research into your topic. Step 5 will help you revise your thesis statement – you should wait until you feel like you are “done” with your research to fill in these steps. Remember this is just a guide! [Google Doc](#). [PDF](#).

STEP 1: DRAFT Create a first draft of your History Day thesis in three sentences. Replace the underlines with your own words answering the questions in parentheses.

Sentence 1: Before Your Main Event

In _____ (*time-period*) the issue in _____ (*place*) was _____ (*problem*).

Sentence 2: The Five W's

In/On _____ (*specific year/date*) _____ (*who: person/group*) _____ (*what the person/ group did*)
because/in order to _____ (*why/motivation*).

Sentence 3: Impact in History

Shortly after, _____ (*describe short-term impact/s*).
This changed history because/by _____ (*describe long-term impact/s*).

STEP 2: COMBINE Combine your sentences into one thesis. Copy your finished sentences from above without the describing words in parentheses. Paste them into the box below. Keep your sentences in the same order.

STEP 3: BRAINSTORM THEME Brainstorm your theme connection. Fill in the blanks with your own words.

Debate and Diplomacy: There was a debate between _____ (*two or more people or groups*) over _____ (*topic*) because _____ (*the reason for debate*). To resolve the issue, the different sides _____ (*diplomatic effort and/or debate*) through _____ (*methods of communication*). This resulted in _____ (*results of diplomatic exchange or debate*). It was a _____ (*Success and/or Failure*) because _____ (*short or long-term consequences*).

STEP 4: ADD IN THEME Copy your thesis from the box in Step 2. Paste in the box below. Think about where the theme fits in your thesis. Revise your thesis to include your ideas on debate and diplomacy from Step 3. Think about whether the debate or diplomatic effort was a success or failure, and what consequences resulted.

STEP 5: REVISE Your thesis statement is a work in progress. Copy your thesis statement from Step 4. Paste in the box below. Edit your thesis to make changes. Think about making your argument stronger, as well as adding in any new supporting evidence from your research.

Creating Your Entry

The last thing you will do for your History Day project is to decide on how to display your research. You can choose from either the **Exhibit** or **Performance** categories.

Working On Your Own or in a Group

You can work on your History Day project either on your own or as a group. Groups can be no larger than 5 people, but ask your teacher about their rules for group work. Below we've outlined some things to consider when deciding to work by yourself or with a group.

Working On Your Own

There are some advantages to taking your History Day journey on your own. These include:

- You can make all of your own choices about your project, from the topic, to research, to your project category
- There can be less distractions than when working with other people
- There is no confusion on who is responsible for what
- You don't have to figure out when or where your group will meet to work on your project.

Working in a Group

There are good things about working in a group too, including:

- You can share the workload between your group members
- There are multiple people to develop and share ideas with
- Different people will bring different skills and interests to the group

Choosing a Category

When picking a category, make sure to think about these:

- Which category best fits your interests and skills?
- Will you have everything you need to make your project?
- Does your research fit one category better than another? For example, do you have enough pictures for an exhibit? Can your argument be told through a performance, its script and props?

Materials Required for Each Category

History Day projects, regardless of the category you choose, require the same three (3) sets of documents: a title page, process paper, and annotated bibliography.

- Title Page: This will be the first page of any written items you turn in. It must include only the title of the project, your name(s), category, division, and required word counts.

Exhibit	Performance
<div>Title Student Name(s) Youth Division Individual Exhibit Exhibit: 299 words Process Paper: 250 words</div>	<div>Title Student Name(s) Youth Division Group Performance Process Paper: 286 words</div>

- Process Paper: This is where you can describe how you picked your topic, did research, and made your project. You must also include your project's historical argument, theme connection, and significance in history. The process paper should be no more than 300 words
- Bibliography: You must have a citation for every source you **used or consulted** when creating your project.

Example for a book citation:

Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*. New York: David McKay Co. Inc, 1962.

For more information about bibliographies, look at the Students Section of the Ohio History Day website at www.ohiohistoryday.org, the Purdue Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>, or the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin Madison at <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>.

Language Requirements for Entry Submission

History Day allows you to focus on any topic that interests you, as long as you connect it to the annual theme. This means you can research and find your sources in another language, too, as long as translations are provided. However, when it comes time to create your project entry, it must be in English.

Category: Exhibit

Exhibits combine text and visual items like photos. Many exhibits are displayed on three-sided boards but you can create a 3D exhibits as well.

Rules to Remember:

- Size: Exhibits can be no larger than 40 inches wide, 30 inches deep, and 6 feet high. Measuring the exhibit does not include the table it rests on; however, it does include any stand you create and any table drapes.
- Word Limit: Only 300 student-composed words on the exhibit. Direct quotes or brief credits on photographs do not count against this limit.
 - This limit includes the text you write for titles, subtitles, captions, graphs, timelines, media devices (e.g., video or computer files), or supplemental materials (e.g. photo albums, scrapbooks, etc.) where you use your own words.
- Credit: All visual sources (photos, paintings, charts, graphs, etc.) need to be given a brief credit on the exhibit itself and a full citation in your annotated bibliography.



Planning Your Exhibit

A successful exhibit entry must be able to explain itself. The judges shouldn't need to depend on your interview to understand your argument. It is important that you design your exhibit in a way that your photographs, written materials, and illustrations are easy to understand and to follow. To help, you can use this [Exhibit Planner](#).

- **Avoiding Clutter.** You may want to try to get as much onto your exhibit as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. Try to select only the most important items for your exhibit.
- **Plot it out in Advance.** It's important to plan out your exhibit in ahead of time. Each section should be labeled. These labels for your title and main ideas are very important because they help move the viewer's eye around your exhibit. Figure out what you want in each section, including drafts or your text and ideas for quotes, photos, and other illustrations. Be sure to lay everything out BEFORE you glue it down.

Category: Performance

This category allows you to create a historical argument through a short play or other performing art. You write the script, make the costumes, and act out historic characters. The challenge is making your performance engaging without sacrificing historical quality

Rules to Remember:

- Time Limit: 7 minutes
- Originality: Your performance must be an original production
- Props: You must set up any props yourself. You have 5 minutes to set up before your performance and 5 minutes at the end to remove props *and* participate in the judge interview.



Write the Script

The average script for a seven-minute performance is three to four double-spaced pages. Make sure your thesis is clear in your performance, ideally incorporated into the beginning and ending of your performance. Make sure your script contains references to the historical evidence, especially the primary source material you found in your research. Using actual dialogue, quotations, or taking excerpts from speeches are good ways to put historical detail into your performance. To help you write your script you can use this Performance Organizer ([Google Doc](#)) ([PDF](#)).

Practice!

Once you have solid script you can begin practicing. This will include blocking, memorizing, costumes, and set design. Often, the simpler props and costumes are the better. Good costumes help make you convincing, but be sure they are a good fit for your topic. Look at photographs or costume guides if you are unsure about the right way to dress. See examples of historical plays to get ideas about stage movements, use of props, etc.

Remember What's Important

Content is the most important factor in your performance and any props you use should be directly related to your theme. Props should help you to highlight the key concepts of your performance. Remember, you only have five minutes to put up and take down your props

Contact Us!

We're so happy that you're participating in History Day this year! We can't wait to see your final project! Remember that if you need help, you can always ask your teacher. Ohio History Day staff are also available to answer questions and give feedback. Feel free to contact us at any time.

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