



Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change

Theme Narrative

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.

Don't forget to check out the [Local History Topic List](#) for more help on how to explore this year's theme of [Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change](#). We're so excited to see what topics you select and the projects you create this year!

What is an innovation?

If we take the simple definition, then we could think of innovation as **a new idea, method or device**. This may lead us to think that the best topics this year will focus on inventions and inventors, but that's only a small part of innovation! Innovation can also include social, political, cultural, and intellectual advances. Invention does involve discovering or creating something new, but in order for something to be an innovation it needs to take that new idea and apply it in a way that changes the way we live our lives and society as we know it.

Let's look at the electric light bulb as an example. Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb is exciting on its own, but it's the change to society that really makes it an innovation. Before the light bulb, the activities of our daily lives were more closely tied to the rising and setting of the sun due to the general weakness of light sources like candles, oil lamps, and gas lighting. The widespread use of lightbulbs led to the creation of the modern power grid, enabled round-the-clock indoor work, and influenced a whole new type of inventions that transformed homes and businesses.

Impact, Influence, Change

This year's theme encourages you to explore not only an innovation itself, but also its impact, influence, and change. These three ideas are closely connected, but each helps us to ask different questions about the past.

An innovation can create change. That change can have an impact on people or society and influence what happens next in history.

Change= What became different. What was different after the innovation than before? Are those changes still visible today?

Example: The telephone made it possible for people to communicate over long distances much more quickly.

Impact= What happened because of the innovation. *What happened because of this innovation? Who or what was affected right away?*

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Example: The telephone influenced the development of new communication technologies.

Influence= How did the innovation affect people, ideas, or future developments. What other innovations, movements, or events grew out of this one? How did it encourage others to think or act differently?

Example: The telephone changed how people communicated, conducted business, and maintained relationships.

Although impact, influence, and change can be looked at separately, looking at them together reveals the complete story by showing how an innovation affected people in the moment, influenced future ideas and developments, and created lasting changes that continue to shape the world today.

For example, Cincinnati's King Records challenged racial barriers by becoming one of the first major recording companies where Black and white musicians worked together in integrated recording sessions. At a time when segregation was common, this innovation influenced the music industry and demonstrated how collaboration across racial lines could help shape American culture.

Multiple Perspectives

When deciding which topic to research, it's important to think about multiple perspectives. Innovations can often affect different people in different ways. Looking at the experiences of inventors, users, supporters, and critics reveals not only how the innovation changed the world, but also the challenges people faced in creating, adopting, or benefiting from each innovation.

Take Garrett Morgan and his early gas mask. Morgan developed a life-saving innovation but he had trouble selling it because as a Black inventor in the 1900s, many white people didn't want to buy his product. While firefighters and rescue workers benefited from his invention, Morgan himself often encountered discrimination and had to navigate barriers that white inventors did not. Examining both the impact of his invention and the obstacles he faced provides a deeper understanding of how innovation and social inequality have shaped history.

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Local History Topics

History happens every day and in your own backyard! In fact, Ohio has played an essential role in both U.S. and world history. We've put together a list of Ohio topics that fit this year's NHD theme, *Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change*. Be sure to check out some example topics, marked with asterisk (*), after the local history list!

African American History

- Brigadier General Charles Young- First African American man to achieve the rank of colonel in the U.S. Army
- Carl B. Stokes- First African American mayor of a major US city
- Charlene Mitchell- first African American woman candidate to run for President of the United States
- Ohio in the Underground Railroad
- Abolitionists and active on the Underground Railroad- Levi Coffin, John P. Parker, John Rankin, Henry Boyd
- **Garrett Morgan***
- AME Church (see Dr. Cheryl LaRoche)
- W.C.A. No. 2—First African American branch of the YWCA in the nation
- Wilberforce University—First Black owned and operated private HBCU

American Indian History

- Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks
- American Indian Movement, 1960s/70s
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act, 1978
- American Indian Wars, 1789-1795
- French Indian Wars, 1754-1763
- Haudenosaunee Confederation
- Michikinikwa, or Little Turtle, leader of the Myaamia
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990
- Tecumseh- leader of the Shawnee
- Western Confederacy

Diplomatic History

- Constitutional Conventions, 1851, 1870, 1912

- King Philip's War, 1675-1678
- The Dayton Accord
- Toledo War & the Frostbitten Convention, 1835-1836
- Treaty of Greenville, 1795
- War of 1812

Economic History

- Baldemar Velasquez – American labor union activist and co-founder of Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO.
- **Building of the Miami and Erie Canal***
- Cincinnati meatpacking "Porkopolis," 1840-1875
- Cleveland Strike at General Motors
- Construction of the National Road in Ohio, 1825-1838
- Formation of the United Auto Workers
- Panic of 1907 & the founding of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland
- United Mine Workers coal strike of 1919 in Ohio
- Youngstown "Little Steel" Strike – Led to the formation of the United Steels Workers Union
- Valentine B. Horton- influential in developing Ohio river commerce

Environmental History

- Cuyahoga River Fires
- National Environment Policy Act, 1970
- The Great Flood of 1913 & the Ohio Conservancy Law
- Scioto River pollution
- The Wilderness Act of 1964
- L. L. Langstroth- father of American beekeeping

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Local History Topics

Political History

- Benjamin Lundy – Abolitionist, publisher of antislavery newspapers
- Brandenburg v. Ohio, 1969
- Columbus Board of Education v. Penick, 1979
- Equality Foundation of Cincinnati vs. City of Cincinnati, 1997
- Florence Ellinwood Allen – First woman elected to the Ohio Supreme Court and first to serve on the Supreme Court of any state
- Joshua R. Giddings – Abolitionist, one of the founders and member of the Republican Party
- Kent State University shootings, 1970
- Mapp v. Ohio, 1961
- Maxwell's Code, 1795
- Ohio Black Codes & Ohio Black Laws, 1804 & 1807 respectively
- Ohio Civil Rights Act of 1959
- Ohio Public Accommodations Law of 1884
- Ohio Statehood, 1803
- Stonewall Union (now known as Stonewall Columbus)
- The Bing Act, 1921
- The Northwest Ordinance, 1787

Science, Technology, and Medical History

- Powel Crosley Jr. – Radio broadcasting pioneer
- AIDS Task Force of Greater Cleveland
- Albert Sabin & the invention of the oral polio vaccine
- Ella P. Stewart – First African American female pharmacist in the U.S.
- Apollo 11 Ohioans- Neil Armstrong, Rita Rapp, Dominick Labino
- Thomas Edison – Menlo Park laboratory & his inventions
- Willem Kolff – Cleveland Clinic doctor who invented kidney dialysis
- Ephraim Shay- developed the Shay engine
- Wilbur, Orville, and Katharine Wright- aviation pioneers
- Charles Goodyear- vulcanized rubber

- Leslie Peltier- amateur astronomer and inventor
- Cleveland Abbe- America's first weather forecaster

Social & Cultural History

- **Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB)***
- Red Power' – Pan Indian Identity, 1960s
- Cleveland Black Gay Pride Weekends
- Harry C. Smith – Journalist & Legislator who championed Civil Rights in Ohio
- Jean O'Leary – one of the founders of National Coming Out Day
- Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster- creators of the "first superhero," Superman
- Jesse Owens & 1936 Berlin Olympics
- **King Records***
- Lane Seminary Debates
- Lockbourne Army Air Force Base (Columbus) – Tuskegee Airmen
- McGuffey Readers – standardized textbook for students around the country in 18th century
- National Football League
- Natalie Clifford Barney – American playwright, poet and novelist
- Paul Laurence Dunbar – African American Poet and activist
- Protest & labor songs of Appalachian coal miners
- Toni Morrison, author & first African American woman to win the Nobel prize in literature
- United Freedom Movement
- American Studio Glass Movement

Women's History

- 19th Amendment
- Betsy Mix Cowles
- **Electra Doren***
- Gloria Steinem
- Lucy Stone
- Oberlin College – First college to admit women and one of the first to admit African Americans
- Ohio Women's Convention at Salem
- Victoria Woodhull

Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB)

Background:

Prior to the 18th century, education for the blind and visually impaired was limited. Education for this population was usually done by self-trained tutors and reserved for the children of the wealthy. This began to change in the United States in 1829 with the establishment of the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts.

Following the example of the Perkins School, Ohio established the Ohio Institution for the Education for the Blind in 1837, making it the first state-sponsored public school for the blind in the United States. 11 students enrolled that first year and between 1839 and 1901, 2,058 students enrolled in the school.

In the early 1900s, the school became known as the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB). Students from the age of 3-21 have attended and received a education ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade.



"Ohio State School for the Blind - Salisbury Cathedral [model]." Ohio Memory <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll34/id/5966>

OSSB used innovative teaching methods and resources designed specifically for their students. Students learned through Braille texts as well as specialized tools like tactile Work Projects Administration models which helped students physically experience historic buildings and concepts.

Questions to Consider:

- What impact did the creation of the OSSB have on access to public education in the United States?
- How did the school influence society's understanding of what blind and visually impaired individuals could achieve?
- How has OSSB used innovative teaching methods and resources to improve education for students?
- What lasting impact has the OSSB had on education, accessibility, and disability rights in Ohio and the United States?

Electra C. Doren

Background:

Electra Doren was the Chief Librarian for the Dayton Library at the turn of the 20th century. During her tenure, she was responsible for many innovative updates and changes to the library system including reorganizing the cataloging system, starting a library training school, and starting one of the first book wagons in the United States.



"Head Librarian at Dayton Public Library, Electra C. Doren. Dayton Metro Library" Society of Ohio Archivists.
https://ohioarchivists.org/2023-archives-month-poster-results/6_dayton_library/

Doren was Chief Librarian at the Dayton Library from 1896-1905. When she first started working for the library, only librarians were allowed access to the book stacks and would go retrieve books for the public. Doren reorganized the library cataloging system using the Dewey Decimal System which allowed the library shelves to be open for public use. She also expanded the public's use of the library by opening the first branches of the library and began one of the first book wagons in the United States. This allowed the more rural, outlying areas of Dayton to have access to the library's books.

Doren also used her skills to influence the field of library science. She was responsible for opening a library training school, only the second of its kind in the country. Additionally, she served on the American Library Association Executive board, an organization that influence libraries across the country, as well as founding and serving as the president of the Ohio Library Association.

Outside of her work in libraries, Doren was also active in the women's suffrage movement. She donated her extensive collection of women's suffrage materials to the Dayton library. It is the basis of their Women's Suffrage Collection, one of the biggest suffrage collections in the U.S.

Questions to Consider:

- How is Doren's work reorganizing the library system and opening a book wagon an innovative effort to provide access to library resources? How did this change the way people access information in the long-term?
- What influence did Doren have on the field of library science in Ohio and across the United States?
- Doren was also a suffragist. How did her actions reflect broader Progressive Era efforts for social changes and women's rights?

King Records

Background:

King Records, active from 1943-1971, was an important record label, with over 500 singles hitting the charts and 32 Number 1 singles. Located in Cincinnati, King Records recorded a variety of music genres like Appalachian folk, jazz, soul, bluegrass, R&B and country. Artists that recorded with King Records include James Brown, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Bootsy Collins, and the Delmore Brothers.



"King Records Employees, c. 1950" Underground Railroad Freedom Center
<https://stories.cincinnati-preservation.org/files/show/110>

The label brought together groups of musicians that would normally not have the opportunity to work together. For example, white Appalachian migrants and Black musicians connected to the Great Migration in a way that encouraged collaboration and crossover recordings in the different genres which helped to shape a new hybrid style of music and some of the earliest forms of rock n' roll.

Not only was King Records a record label, but it also recorded, manufactured, distributed, and promoted its own music. It was one of the first racially integrated businesses in Cincinnati at a time when informal segregation and discrimination were common. Black employees held positions in all aspects of the record label, from working the record press to key creative and managerial positions.

Innovative hiring practices, both in the production of records and in the musicians King Records represented, created an environment that pushed toward economic, social, and racial equity all while changing the music landscape.

Questions to Consider:

- How did Cincinnati's unique geographic location between the North and South influence King Records hiring practices and musical production?
- How did crossover recordings between genres lead to innovation in American music?
- How did King Records use innovative hiring and business practices to create new opportunities for Black employees and musicians?

Ohio Canal System

Background:

The Ohio canal system, consisting of 813 miles of canals, is an innovative system that created great economic change in the region. Built between 1825 and 1847, the canal system consists of two major canals: the Ohio and Erie Canal which connects Lake Erie in Cleveland to the Ohio River in Portsmouth and the Miami and Erie Canal which connects Cincinnati to Toledo. At a time when Ohio was part of the frontier, the canal system connected settlers to the rest of the nation and marked the beginning of a national transportation system.



"19th-century image of a canal boat on the Ohio and Erie Canal in Greater Akron" Ohio DNR <https://ohiodnr.gov/discover-and-learn/safety-conservation/about-ODNR/real-estate/canal->

Construction of the canals happened at a time when Ohio was suffering financial hardships after the War of 1812. The canals were an important avenue for trade and commerce, but most importantly significantly reduced the cost of transporting goods. Before the canal system, it could take more than a month for settlers to get their goods to markets back east. Once the canal systems were functioning, Ohioans were able to move goods more easily to national and international

markets which increased trade and economic activity in the area.

Not only did the canals allow for the movement of goods, but it allowed for the movement of people as well. Cities grew along the canal routes, and the improved economic landscape made Ohio a destination for settlers.

Questions to Consider:

- How was the Ohio canal system and innovative form of transportation in the early 1800s?
- What challenges did workers face when building the canal system and how were those challenges overcome?
- How did the construction of the canals reflect innovation in engineering and infrastructure during the 19th century?
- How did the canal system change everyday life for the people living in Ohio and those who moved to Ohio?

Garrett Morgan

Background:

Garrett Morgan was a prolific inventor and businessman in Cleveland who is best known for creating a manual traffic signal and an early gas mask.



"Garrett Morgan" Scholastic
<https://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/inventors/morgan.htm>

Morgan was a teenager when he moved to Cincinnati where he found work as a handyman. A few years later he moved to Cleveland and went into business for himself with a sewing machine repair shop.

In 1914, Morgan patented his safety hood, a precursor to the gas mask, and went on to use it to rescue workers trapped under Lake Erie after a gas explosion at the Cleveland Waterworks. Even though his invention had the potential to save lives, Morgan had trouble selling his devices because people refused to buy products from a Black inventor. Because of this, Morgan changed his business practices including renaming the device and hiring white actors to promote the product.

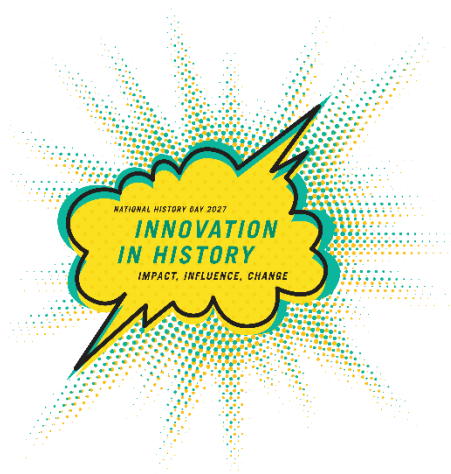
Morgan is also famous for his invention of the manual traffic signal. After witnessing a collision between a horse-drawn carriage and another vehicle in 1923, Morgan created a three-way traffic signal that allowed vehicles to safely pass through an intersection without risking a collision.

In addition to his inventions, Morgan was a well-known figure in the African American community in Cleveland. He helped found the Cleveland Association of Colored Men, established the all-Black Wakeman Country Club, and co-founded the Cleveland Call, a newspaper that was the predecessor of to Cleveland's major African American newspaper.

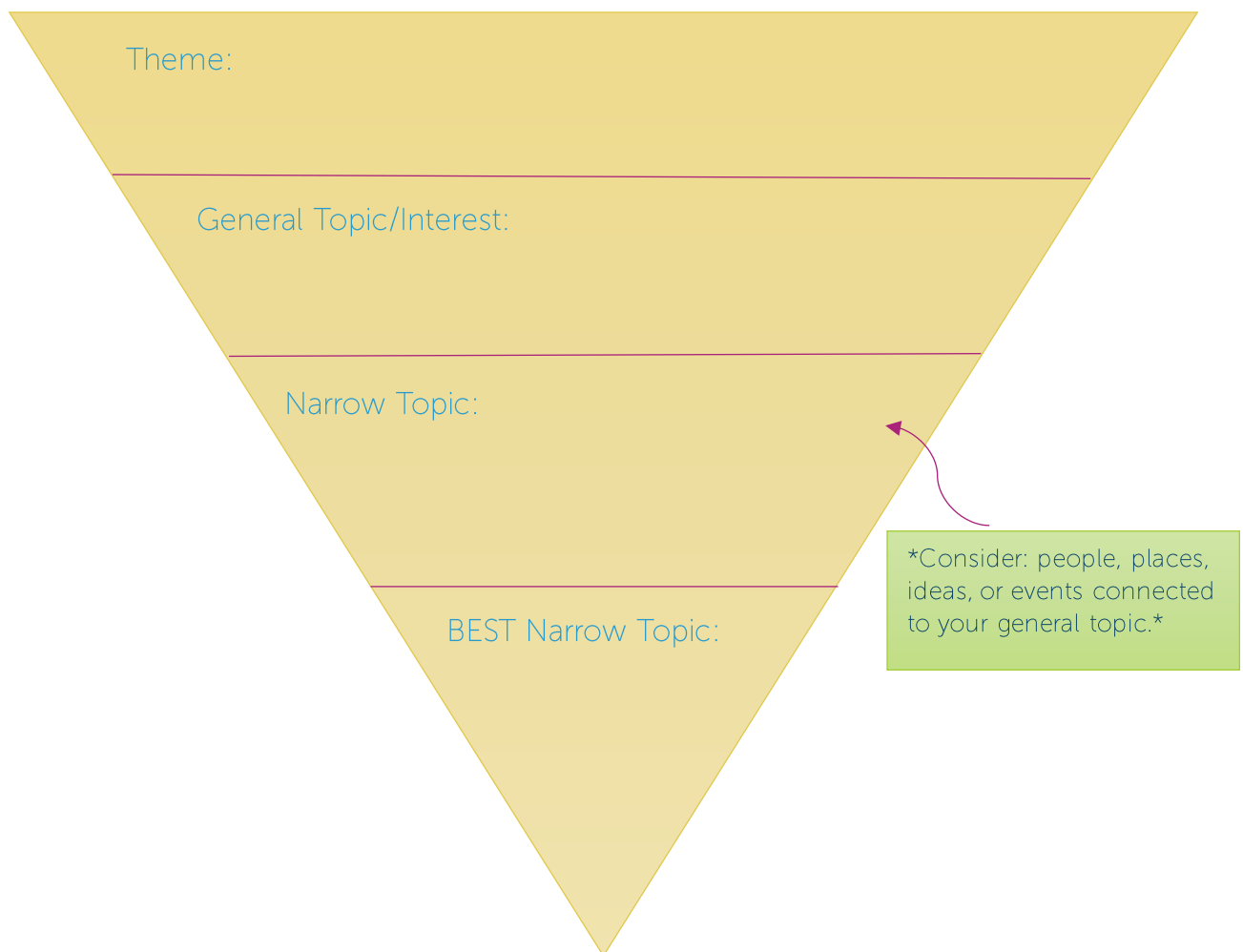
Questions to Consider:

- In what ways did Morgan's innovative solutions to problems change the lives of those around him and society as a whole?
- Morgan worked during the Segregation Era. How did this shape the challenges he faced as an inventor?
- How did Morgan use entrepreneurship and innovation to create opportunities for himself and others?
- How did Morgan's work reflect broader changes taking place in the early 20th century, such as urbanization and industrialization.

2027 Theme Graphic Organizer: Innovation in History



Innovations have shaped history in countless ways. Some innovations create immediate change, while others influence people, ideas, and events over many years. Every innovation has an impact, but that impact can be positive, negative, or a combination of both. Rather than trying to research an entire field of innovation—such as transportation, medicine, or communication—look for a specific invention, individual, discovery, or idea that interests you. A focused topic will allow you to better analyze how an innovation made an impact, influenced others, and created change throughout history. Let's use the funnel graphic organizer below to help us narrow down our ideas.



Now, consider your BEST narrow topic idea. What innovation is at the center of your topic? What problem or need inspired this innovation? What impact did it have when it was introduced? Who or what did it influence? Did it create lasting change or more short term change? Were there unexpected consequences? How did people respond to the innovation, and how has its influence continued over time?

Your thesis statement should include:

background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background:

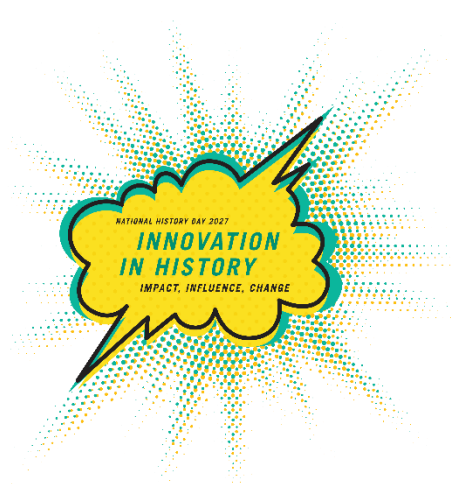
Innovation: Impact, Influence, Change:

Immediate Impact:

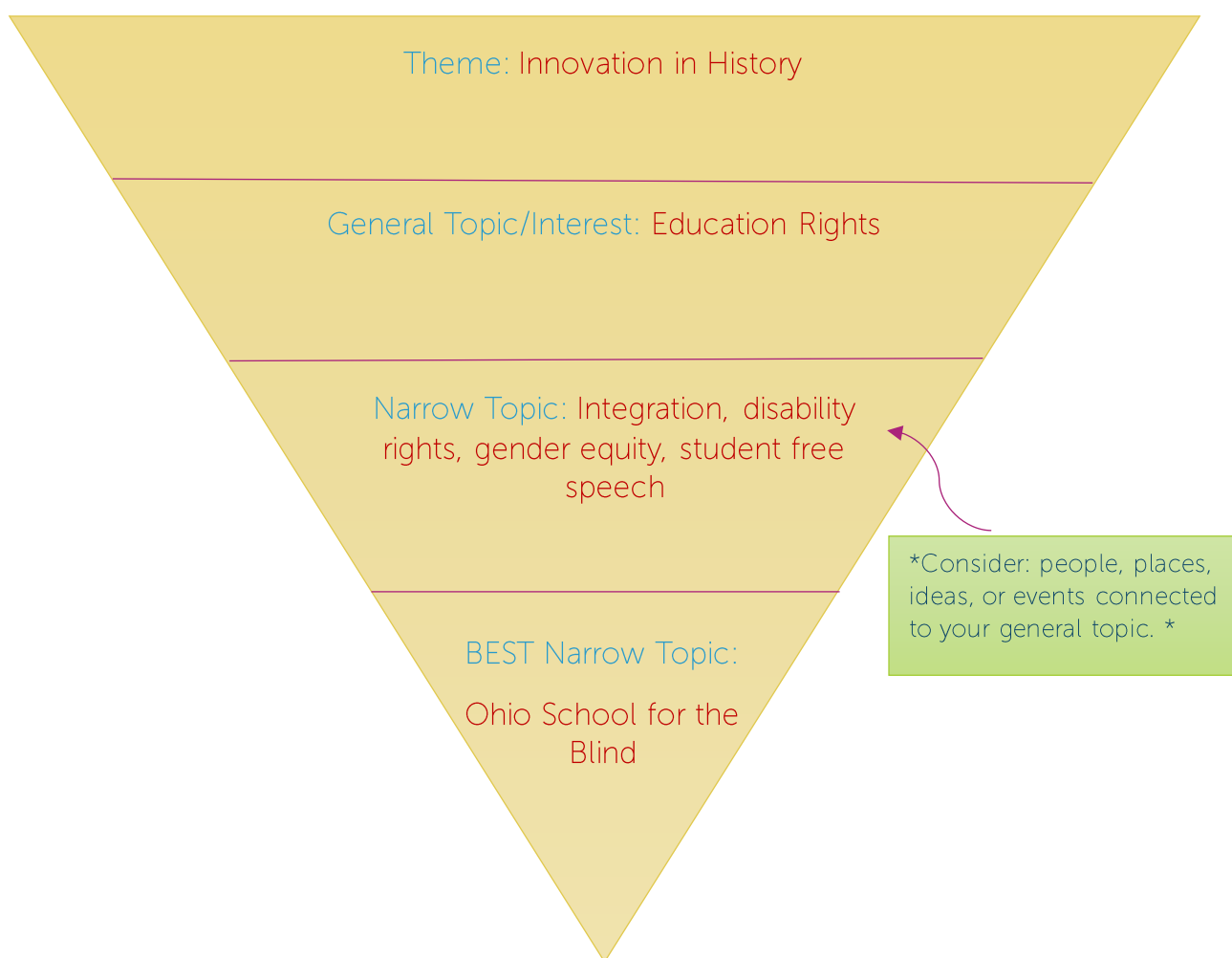
Long-Term Significance:

Full Thesis Statement:

2027 Theme Graphic Organizer: Innovation in History



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.



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background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background: Prior to the 18th century, students who were blind or visually impaired were usually taught by self-trained tutors and reserved for children of the wealthy.

Innovation: Impact, Influence, Change: Opened in 1837, the Ohio State School for the Blind transformed education through innovative, specialized instruction and accessible learning tools.

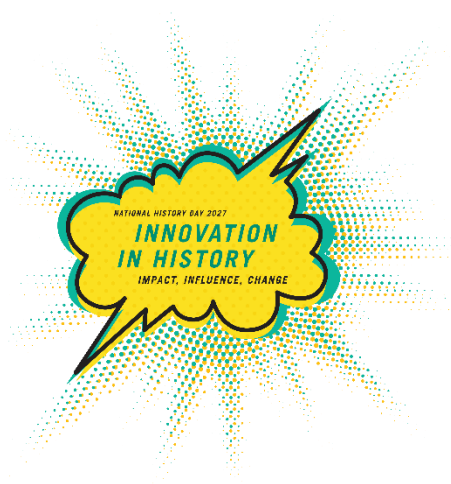
Immediate Impact: The school provided state-funded education to students who had previously been excluded from public schools.

Long-Term Significance: The school led to long term impacts on the equity of education for students including the creation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

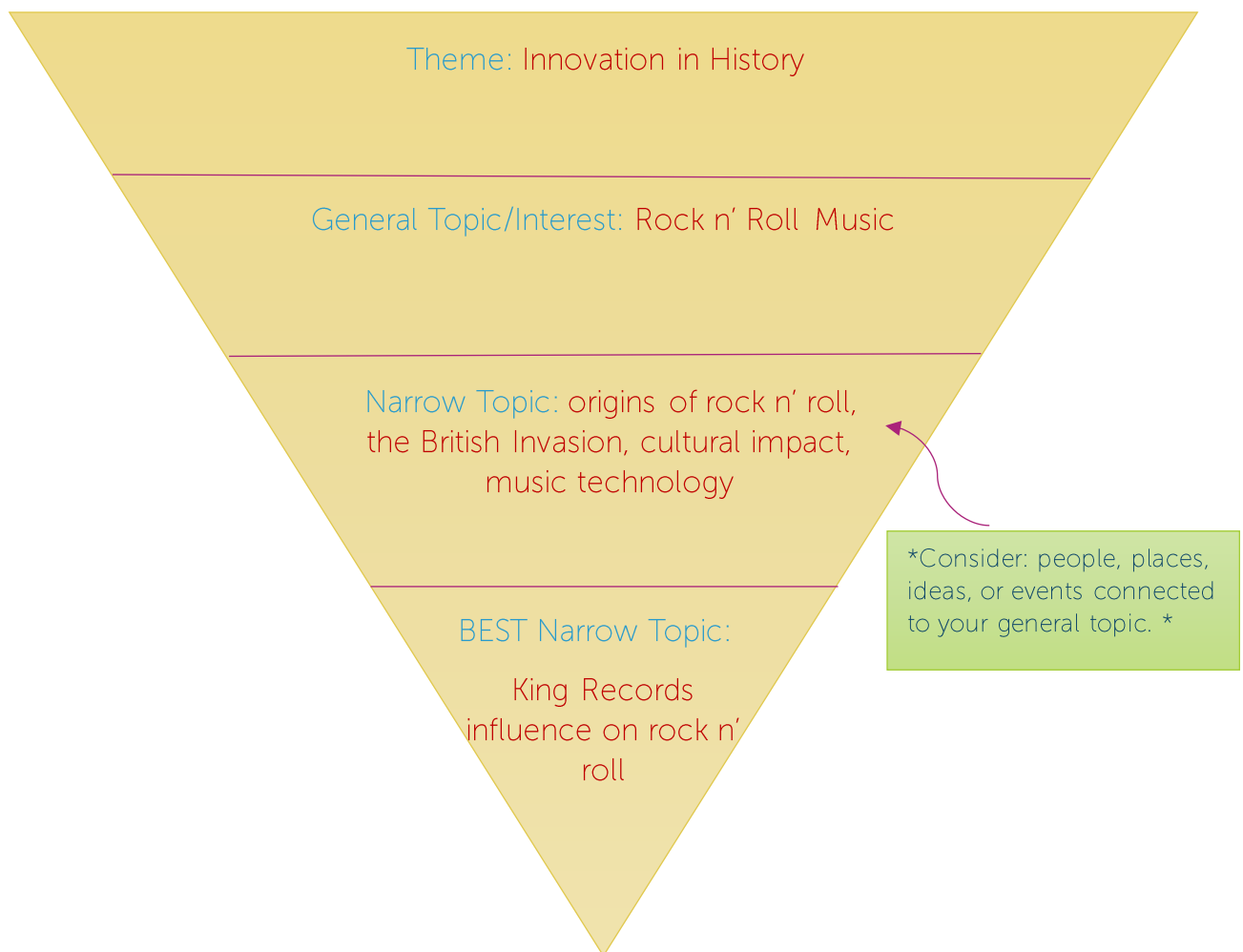
Full Thesis Statement:

Before the 18th century, educational opportunities for students who were blind or visually impaired were limited to wealthy families who could afford private tutors. The opening of the Ohio State School for the Blind in 1837 transformed education through innovative, state-funded specialized instruction and accessible learning tools, providing educational opportunities for students who had previously been excluded from public schools. Its impact extended far beyond Ohio, influencing the development of specialized education, expanding educational equity for students with disabilities, and changing how schools across the United States approached accessibility and inclusion.

2027 Theme Graphic Organizer: Innovation in History



Innovations have shaped history in countless ways. Some innovations create immediate change, while others influence people, ideas, and events over many years. Every innovation has an impact, but that impact can be positive, negative, or a combination of both. Rather than trying to research an entire field of innovation—such as transportation, medicine, or communication—look for a specific invention, individual, discovery, or idea that interests you. A focused topic will allow you to better analyze how an innovation made an impact, influenced others, and created change throughout history. Let's use the funnel graphic organizer below to help us narrow down our ideas.



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Your thesis statement should include:

background topic/theme words immediate impact long-term significance

Thesis Statement Draft:

Historical Background: During the mid-20th century, the American music industry had many workplaces that were divided by racial segregation which limited the collaboration between Black and white musicians and restricting opportunities for Black artists and employees.

Innovation: Impact, Influence, Change: From 1943 to 1971, Cincinnati's King Records transformed the music industry by adopting innovative, racially integrated hiring practices and bringing together musicians from diverse backgrounds to create, record, manufacture, distribute, and promote music under one company.

Immediate Impact: King Records provided opportunities for Black artists and employees in all areas of the business while encouraging collaboration between musicians from different racial and musical traditions, leading to new sounds and the early development of rock and roll.

Long-Term Significance: King Records influenced the future of American music by shaping rock and roll while demonstrating that integrated workplaces and diverse creative collaboration could drive both cultural change and greater social and economic equity.

Full Thesis Statement:

At a time when racial segregation limited opportunities in the music industry, King Records revolutionized music by pioneering integrated hiring practices and fostering collaboration between musicians of different racial and musical backgrounds. The company's innovative approach immediately expanded opportunities for Black artists and employees while creating new musical styles, and its lasting influence transformed American popular music and demonstrated how diversity and inclusion could inspire cultural and social change.