



A Guide to Conducting National History Day Research

Creating a research project for National History Day can be a very rewarding achievement for students; from learning how to properly conduct research to learning about an interesting historical event to producing a finished product culminating the work they've put into it. However, oftentimes students may not know how to begin their project or even how to do research. Knowing the most effective methods to make their project is pivotal to making a great addition to the NHD accomplishments. But how does one know what to do? This is a basic research guide to help student learn the most effective means to discover an idea and how to write about it.

Step 1: Discovering a topic

One of the most important steps in writing a research paper is knowing what to write about! Thinking of a historical event that you are interested in is one way to approach this. Perhaps you wish to know more about a certain topic or have an idea about something that would produce a great project. Another great way to do this is by asking an archivist or NHD participating museum or institute. For example, at the Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections the Curator-Lead Archivist is available to answer questions, or help with suggestions. This will help you produce an idea that will be interesting, but can also aid in the primary and secondary source research you can start with.

Step 2: Primary and Secondary Sources

After deciding a potential subject, research will begin. Examining both primary resources and secondary works is how this is accomplished. High school teachers often overlook knowing the difference between the two, so it is important to know what makes them primary or secondary (more in-depth look of the differences can be found in the resources below).

Primary Sources: Autobiographies, diaries, e-mail, interviews, letters, minutes, news film footage, official records, photographs, raw research data, speeches.

Secondary Works: Secondary sources provide interpretation and analysis of primary sources. These include works from historians, newspaper articles examining an event or person, and many other such works.

Step 3: Beginning Research

This step is finding the raw information that you will base your paper off of. Once you have discovered a certain subject you wish to conduct research on, you will find primary and secondary sources that relate to this subject. Finding these resources may be difficult at first, but with the aid of NHD participating adults and archivists or librarians, a number of methods for finding these sources can be discovered. From archives, libraries, and the Internet are great places to begin. Using key terms or search engines such as Google Scholar, a number of these sources can be found.

Reading or viewing these materials will provide a massive amount of information so it is important to document what most applies to what you wish to write about. Taking notes and marking pages numbers will be required for this step. Gathering information that has little to do with your subject will absorb time and effort so it is important to keep in mind what you're writing about!

Step 4: Creating an Outline

Once all of the information has been gathered, forming a basic idea of how the paper or project will come together is very important. Normally a paper consists of an introduction (which is where your main point will be noted), a body (which will be the bulk of your paper and give the reasoning behind your topic of research), and the conclusion (where you will summarize your reasoning and conclude the paper).

Step 5: Writing the Paper

Once the outline is complete, you should have an idea about how your paper will flow and progress. Using the information you took down as notes and producing the information is similar to filling in the outline. It is like having a skeleton (the outline) and adding the skin and muscles (the notes and information you have gathered).

Once the paper has been written, it is important to reread it multiple times as well as showing it to another person, most likely the person aiding your research, and having them revise it. They will provide another opinion and tell you what

needs to be fixed up to create the best, finished product. Once this is accomplished and revised, your paper is complete!

Additional Resources on How to Conduct Research

- **Differences between Primary and Secondary Works:**
<http://lib1.bmcc.cuny.edu/help/sources.html>
- **National History Day Website:** Provides more detailed methods to conducting research and how to produce a great project.
<http://www.nhd.org/>
- **National History Day Annual Theme:** Information regarding the annual theme can be found here.
<http://www.nhd.org/annualtheme.htm>
- **Library of Congress:** The LoC provides many additional secondary and primary sources that can be used in your research.
<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>
- **Wikihow:** a step-by-step guide to conducting research.
<http://www.wikihow.com/Conduct-Academic-Research>

Potential Topics for the 2014 Theme of “Rights and Responsibilities in History” at the Pennsylvania Hospital Historical Collections

- The Rights and Responsibilities of Doctors during the Philadelphia Yellow Fever outbreak of 1793
- The Rights and Responsibilities of Doctors (or the Pennsylvania Hospital) during the Revolutionary or Civil War
- The Rights and Responsibilities of patients of the Pennsylvania Hospital
- The Rights and Responsibilities of Benjamin Rush during his time as a doctor at the Pennsylvania Hospital

In addition to these potential topics, students should also feel free to ask the Curator-Lead Archivist Stacey Peeples for more ideas.