

Choosing a Topic

(Developed by Susan Sittenauer)

How do I choose a topic? Think, read, talk...

Topics for research are everywhere! Think about a time in history or individuals or events that are interesting to you. Start a list. Read books, newspapers or other sources of information and add to your list. Talk with relatives, neighbors, or people you know who have lived through a particular time in history that interests you and add more ideas. Keep thinking, reading and talking to people until you have many ideas that are interesting. Now go back through the list and circle the ideas that connect with the theme. From the ideas that you circled, select one to begin your research. Keep your list because you might need it again.

I have an idea for a topic, now what? Narrow down the topic and connect it to the theme...

Selecting a National History Day topic is a process of gradually narrowing down the area of history (period or event) that interests you to a manageable subject. For example, if you're interested in Native Americans and the theme is Rights and Responsibilities in History, a natural topic would be treaty rights. Now from there, you would consider the resources you have available to you—perhaps your local historical society—and possibly choose a Native American/U.S. treaty based in your state's history. Your process might look something like this:

Theme: Rights and Responsibilities in History

Interest: Native Americans

Topic: Treaty Rights

Issue: 1788 Fort Schuyler Treaty

[See more examples...](#)

Or, if you're interested in Women's Rights and the theme is the Individual in History, you might choose voting rights. Next, consider where you might find further information on voting rights like a public library. After a library search and reading several texts about the era, you identify the women's suffrage movement as a topic, and then a leader in the struggle for the vote, Alice Paul. In this case, your process looks like this:

Theme: Individual in History

Interest: Women's Rights

Topic: Suffrage Movement

Issue/Individual: Alice Paul

Or what if you are interested in The Civil War and the theme is Turning Points in History? You might read about the different battles. Utilizing the internet, you can take virtual tours and learn about different battles through the National Park Service. For instance, www.nps.gov/gett takes you to The Battle of Gettysburg or www.nps.gov/mana will take you to the battle of Bull Run. Pay close attention to other recommended resources as you read. They may point you to further reading on your topic. After reading the websites, you decide the turning point in The Civil War is The Battle of Gettysburg. The process looks like this:

Theme: Turning Points in History

Interest: The Civil War

Topic: Battles

Issue/Events: The Battle of Gettysburg

Or what if you are interested in science and the theme is Innovation in History? You might research medical discoveries that changed the world like the discovery of penicillin or isolating DNA. Look for resources in libraries, excellent web sites and history of science museums. The process for narrowing your topic and connecting with the theme might follow this sequence:

Theme: Innovation in History

Interest: Science

Topic: Medical Discoveries

Issue/Discovery: Penicillin