

History as Mystery – an approach by KHD Mentor Anne Hawkins, who can be reached at apwhawkins@msn.com

Method: Before I even begin discussing a History Day "project" with students (which can overwhelm beginners), I first introduce them to one of the compelling mysteries from a resource, below. I present a teaser, some skeletal information about the mystery, and some possible clues. Then I ask students to come up with a theory for what might have happened using the evidence given, and to discuss in small groups their ideas for solutions. Each solution theory needs credible, primary-source documentary evidence--someone can't just claim, for example, that an alien was involved and argue that point. Students love solving and discussing the mystery! It gives them a voice, centers their intellects and reasoned opinions, and encourages them to think creatively, analytically, methodically, and/or thoroughly--and every person possesses at least one of these mental strengths, so all can contribute.

I begin with a historical mystery which experts agree has been solved, so that at the end of that first history-mystery class, I can share the solution, and students can feel the satisfaction of "knowing," before later delving into the ambiguities of history. We'll do two or three of these types of "solution known" history mysteries in class; students of all ages enjoy the mystery of the *Mary Celeste* "ghost ship" in this category. By the time we work on mystery #3, I'll explain to students what *thesis* means and what it is, and they can immediately relate that their thesis statements have been their ideas about "what really happened" in the mystery--this seems organic and understandable to them. When I explain what *argument* means in an academic sense, they understand that to mean the discussions they've been having about the mystery with their classmates; likewise, *evidence to support a thesis or argument* makes sense to them as the documentation or text they've been using to "prove" that their idea about what really happened is on-track. And the relevant "So what?" is that satisfaction they feel when they understand the solution to the mystery from the clues.

Next, I'll introduce a handful of mysteries that have not been solved by experts: Amelia Earhart's disappearance is one that Kansas students love and gives us a chance to talk about *evidentiary quality* and sort through unsupported or unsubstantiated theories. We'll work on a handful of these unsolved historical mysteries spanning different eras/geographies/storylines, as time allows. Without being aware of it, students are

learning as they go, focused on the mystery itself, how to create and advance a thesis, support it with quality evidence, think critically and analytically, and explain "So what?" relevance.

Near the end of the investigative unit--when we've explored 8 to 10 mysteries-- I'll ask each student to choose their favorite mystery we've examined together, and share their investigation with a larger group (another class, let's say) by creating a 2-page paper, poster, TikTok-length video documentary or Google Slide show with voice over, short performance, or webpage on Weebly. These are small, to start with--sample versions of 5 minutes or 750 words of a History Day-style project--so students can "try out" different project formats. Based upon shared interests in a favorite mystery, I allow students to work alone or in a group I assign from the other students who also picked that mystery as their favorite.

THEN, I talk to them about--now that they are knowledgeable and have detective skills-- taking on a larger history mystery investigation of their own choosing: a History Day project and sharing their historical detective expertise with a school audience or parents at an upcoming open house or History Fair. (I've used this preparation work and the resulting project for the HGSS state assessment, for example.) I don't emphasize competition at this point to students who would be daunted by that, because I firmly believe that ALL students can do HD projects; but I do let those who are interested know that there is an opportunity in February to submit their work for district competition. All our "history mystery" learning is preliminary, then, to choosing a History Day project topic and project format. Once students have experienced being "history detectives" with the in-class mysteries and have a working knowledge of the tasks, terminology, and experiences, students are then free to begin working on "their own investigation" for History Day within the annual theme. Some of my students have adapted one of the history mysteries for their NHD project and had great success with that; others take the investigative process they've practiced and applied it to a historical story, event, or person they want to know more about.

Selected Resources:

* books by Paul Aron, which include *Unsolved Mysteries of History*, *Unsolved Mysteries of American History*, and *More Unsolved Mysteries of American History*

* <https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/educators/lessonplan/crack-the-case-histories-toughest-mysteries/index.html>

* <https://www.livescience.com/11361-history-overlooked-mysteries.html>

* books published by Teacher Created Resources in the *Mysteries in History* series: Ancient History, World History, and American History

* National Geographic Kids book, *History's Mysteries: Curious Clues, Cold Cases, and Puzzles From the Past*

* Time for Kids books *Unsolved! Mysterious Events*, and *Unsolved! Mysterious Places*

* there are tons of other wonderful mysteries I've collected over the years, with documentary "clues" for students to sort through, which I'm willing to share if a teacher wants to contact me and let me know if they have a particular grade-level, geography, or time period they want to do a mystery with.

***note: I have to preview much of History.com's materials, which are often over sensationalized for broadcast, leaning more heavily on theory than evidence many times, so I caution teachers to tread carefully and preview video content. Sometimes I will show just portions of videos to sketch out the brief outline of a mystery, and stop there--this allows students to develop their own theories, support them with evidence from materials I provide for searching or what they find on their own (depending upon student age and skills), and discuss them, before latching onto a wild or popular theory without substantiation.