

Tips for Creating a Successful History Day Entry

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Tip 1: Analysis and Interpretation

One of the most important features of a good History Day entry—perhaps the key component which makes a Superior entry stand apart from an Excellent one—is, oddly enough, one of the most uncommon and overlooked aspects of an entry. Your analysis of your research findings, your interpretation of what happened (or how or why), is your job as a historian. This means going beyond reporting the known facts of a topic in history. You should develop your own conclusions about your topic, based solidly upon the research you've done. History is not set in stone, unchanging, undebatable. It is fluid, dynamic, changing whenever a new document comes to light or a new interpretation on the acknowledged historical facts is presented. For instance, the fact that President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 is an undisputed fact. *Our interpretation* of the meaning of that proclamation, Lincoln's motives in issuing it, and the significance of the proclamation to African Americans has changed over time. This is where your work is important: not to merely report facts, but to **analyze** them and **interpret** them for your audience, so that readers or viewers come away from your work knowing something new about that topic in history.

When you create a History Day entry, assume three roles for yourself: that of a reporter, a detective and a storyteller. Most History Day projects do a superb job of answering the questions of a reporter. Most excellent projects consider the questions of a detective. Outstanding History Day entries go further—they include the questions of the storyteller as well. This process of analyzing and interpreting your research is depicted in the chart at the end of this guide.

In your entry, the written materials which accompanying it, and your answers to judges' (or audience questions, you should demonstrate that you've reached your own conclusions about your historical topic (interpretation) and how you reached them (analysis). What is the main argument that you want to make in your project—your thesis? How are your conclusions about the subject distinct from those of other historians who have studied this topic? How are your conclusions different from those of some primary observers of the time period?

Tip 2: Substantive Research

You will need to research broadly and deeply, in order to have quality research findings to analyze and a good-enough grasp of the known facts to develop your own interpretations of the historical topic. Keep three descriptors in mind as you are researching: Primary, Wide-Ranging, and Balanced.

Successful History Day entries rely upon the evidence of first-hand observers of the historical event. These observers may have taken photographs, written letters or diary entries, enacted legislation, given a speech, completed a government document, kept organizational minutes, drawn a cartoon, created a song or painting, made a tool or other artifact, submitted an advertisement to a publication, written a reference guide (a cookbook, a pamphlet on treating medical ailments at home, a guide for immigrants), or reported about an event for a newspaper or broadcast. These **primary** sources, among others, are not only necessary to a successful project; they are also engaging, interesting, puzzling and fun. They can provide you with information you can't find anywhere else on your topic. Because every historian interprets differently the evidence s/he finds, you may not be able to find unusual information about your topic by relying completely on **secondary** sources, which are the writings of other historians (or non-participants in the historical

event) who have studied the primary-source evidence. *Be careful not to confuse primary sources with secondary sources!* If you need help distinguishing between the two, ask your teacher or your State History Day Coordinator for help, or consult a reference book such as *A Student's Guide to History* by Jules R. Benjamin (Bedford St. Martins, 8/ed, 2001).

Wide-ranging research is important. Study secondary sources thoroughly while looking for primary sources. Secondary sources will give you a good information base for your research, in addition to telling you the interpretations and viewpoints of other historians. If you are to add something new to the body of knowledge on your topic—as superior History Projects do—you'll need to know what other historians have written about that same topic. Footnotes and bibliographies in secondary sources are often the best place to start looking for primary sources—these citations can often point you directly to a document or archive, telling you right where to look for more in-depth information on a specific fact. As you look for primary-source evidence, be sure to look in a wide range of places: libraries (rare book rooms or sound/video recordings collections are often great, under-used sources), archives, historical societies, government records offices, and reliable internet sites. Relying on just one place for your information—the internet, for example—makes it more difficult for you to find evidence that's broad enough or deep enough to develop good conclusions about your topic.

Balanced research means that you have looked for multiple viewpoints from historical observers of the time period. Sometimes these views oppose each other: for example, the perspective of activist Ida B. Wells on lynching would not have been shared by a leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Even people who fought on the same side of an issue or worked together on a project could have differing perspectives on their work or their cause. You'll want to actively look for many viewpoints, and consider the evidence of those views, which don't support the conclusions you are leaning toward or with which you disagree. As you study and analyze these perspectives, ask yourself:

- ✓ **Believability:** Is this source credible? Is this person knowledgeable about the event? What are their values, beliefs or experiences, which had an affect on their perspective? Am I looking at this person's complete message, or just a piece of what this person wrote or said? Are these the original words of the source, or has someone else edited or translated them? *Be on your guard not to believe everything you read or see—study critically.*
- ✓ **Purpose:** Why was this document created? What was its intended purpose? Who was the source addressing with these words (or images)? Did the source want to convince or persuade people with this message? Did s/he intend for this information to be kept private, or publicly known?
- ✓ **Context:** What is the historical context for this source? What was going on in history at the time this evidence was created? What happened in history before and after this person created this piece of evidence? What were the customs, traditions or beliefs of people in the source's society (or community) at the time?

Tip 3: Significance and Effect

You can demonstrate your well-developed analytical and interpretive skills by paying close attention to the significance of your topic in history. Addressing significance means answering the question, "So what?" about the facts you've researched. "So what if this event had never occurred?" "So what if this leader had made a different decision?" "So what about our lives are different because of the actions of the people connected with this topic?" You must explain how your topic is important, what effect it made on history. While your research topic may be fascinating and not well-known, and you

earnestly believe that more people should know about the subject, that alone doesn't convey the significance of that subject in history. You must emphasize how history was changed or affected by the persons or events you've chosen to research.

Resist the temptation to wait until the end of your presentation to explain your topic's significance, in the way a mystery writer reveals only at the end of a story how important facts fit together. State early in your entry how your subject is significant or affected history in important ways. This will be one of the key messages you will want your audience to remember about your work. Include significance and effect in your thesis statement at the beginning of your project, and emphasize significance again near the end.

Tip 4: Historical Context

No historical person, place or event operated in isolation, unaffected by other events taking place around it. Forces of history—the political, economic, legal, social, cultural and intellectual realities of the time period—affected the topic you are researching. Explain in your work what those forces were, the **context** of your topic. Discuss what was taking place in the larger world around, and outside of, your topic. Was there a larger movement or trend taking place during this time period, of which your topic was a part? Or does your topic seem to reverse a trend of its time or challenge a larger movement? What was going on in history before the time period involving your topic—out of what political atmosphere or legal climate, for instance, did your topic emerge?

Studying what was happening in history at the time of your event helps you determine your topic's significance. Context helps you understand the effect your topic had on history. Explaining your topic's historical context also helps your audience better understand your work and make connections between your topic and other events in history.

Tip 5: Historical Accuracy

You can avoid most errors of fact in your work by researching as many details about your subject as possible. Detailed research can also help you make educated interpretations if some of the "facts" you uncover contradict one another. If you make an assumption about what you believe happened, based upon your study of the evidence, you should say so directly. This not only demonstrates that you have analyzed and interpreted your research (Tip #1), but clarifies for your audience that this is your educated theory rather than an undisputed historical fact.

Be very careful not to make cause-and-effect assumptions without the evidence to directly support those statements. If you conclude, "The American colonists wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. From then on, they were free of the tyranny of an English monarch," you must provide detailed evidence from your research to back up your statement. Without supporting evidence or detailed explanation, a cause-and-effect assumption is really a hasty generalization—and it will call attention to itself in your work as a place where more research needed to be done. If you find you can't explain with solid evidence a point you wish to make, than you should rethink your analysis of your research on this point to avoid historical inaccuracy.