

The Five Steps of a History Day Project

Susan Eva O'Donovan, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of History, The University of Memphis

A lot of mystery surrounds what it is historians do, and what it means to think like a historian. In large part, this mystery stems from the fact that the history we encounter in our daily lives is usually the finished product. Books, documentaries, journal articles, even lectures mark the end, not the beginning or even the middle of historical thinking. They communicate the conclusions we reach through our thinking, not the thinking itself.

Making matters worse, the order in which historians present their information is not the same order in which they find and analyze their information. As Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska (himself a historian) recently observed, the order of discovery is not the same as the order of presentation. Yet it is often the case that our students do not recognize these differences and end up combining and sometimes confusing what should be a series of clearly defined steps. It is a misunderstanding that can result in inside-out and upside-down thinking that encourages students to decide what form their projects will take and the points their projects will make without realizing that not all entry categories fit all topics, causing them to force-fit their topics into specific categories. The result can be projects that are light on research, light on analysis, and light on thinking while being heavy on presentation. In other words, projects with lots of bells and whistles and not much by way of substance.

The good news is that outcomes of this kind are entirely avoidable. All it requires is for us to help our students get

turned around and marching (thinking!) in the right direction. As most professional historians know, historical thinking unfolds in a near universal sequence, one that holds true regardless of what we are studying. It is a sequence that can be boiled down into five basic steps. When followed, these steps will not only ensure that discovery and presentation assume their proper relationship, but our students will better understand why and how discovery is different from and needs to precede final decisions about presentation. More importantly, in directing our students through these steps, we will help them become better historical thinkers by letting them experience first-hand what it is professional historians do on a daily basis.

Final presentation cannot occur before discovery is concluded. In most cases, students will complete the discovery phase prior to determining their entry category. However, there will be students with strong entry category preferences, or classroom situations in which a particular entry category is simply not an option. In those cases, we must help our students understand that not all topics can be properly presented in all entry categories, and guide them to select topics that can be clearly and effectively communicated in their preferred category. Regardless of when the entry category decision is made, students must confirm that their category will allow them to thoroughly convey their research and reasoning.



Students often focus on the final stage of an NHD project, but there are five steps to create a successful learning experience. Courtesy of National History Day.



Successful NHD projects start when students formulate a research question to drive their research process. Courtesy of National History Day.

STEP ONE: FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Regardless of whether a professional historian is writing a blockbuster book or a student is preparing an entry for the National History Day® (NHD) contest, all historical research begins with a question. Research questions function as both compass and map. They tell us where to go, and they tell us how to get there. Research questions are not themes, nor are they topics. They are, however, related to both. Think of research questions as the operational side of a topic or theme. Take, for instance, the 2019 theme, *Triumph & Tragedy in History*. It tells students what they need to think about. But in itself, *Triumph & Tragedy in History* is not a question, nor is the topic about which our student is interested. Think of theme and topic as the soil within which we plan on digging. Like an archaeologist, we need something to be digging for, and that is where a research question comes in. Questions remind us what it is we are trying to figure out or discover.

For instance, if our student is thinking in terms of tragedy and triumph and is interested in the topic of the American Civil War, there is a whole range of questions she can ask. She can ask about women's experiences during the war, she can ask about the war's impact on the environment, she can ask about how the war changed technology or medicine or relationships between citizens and the federal government, she can ask about the impact of war on the national economy. If a student struggles to identify a question, point her toward the library and have her open up a secondary source on her chosen topic. Since a good book often generates questions (Why didn't the author think this? What if the author had thought about that?), historians often find their research questions in the secondary literature.

Notice, though, that I have not mentioned much about the theme. I did that purposefully. Our student needs to start

digging into the primary sources, using her research question as her shovel, before she can begin to decide if what she discovers constitutes a triumph or a tragedy. All we want her to do at this stage is keep that theme tucked away in the back of her mind.

STEP TWO: LOOKING FOR INFORMATION (OTHERWISE KNOWN AS RESEARCH)

After weighing her options against the NHD theme and maybe a having a few conversations with her teacher, our student has settled on a research question. She wants to know how the American Civil War impacted technology. She may want to refine her question a little bit more (technology is still a pretty big subject), perhaps by narrowing it down to medical technology or transportation technology, but regardless, she knows that she is on the hunt for information about technology during the Civil War. Her research question is her road map and compass all rolled into one. It points her toward the more useful sources and, at the same time, reminds her about what she is supposed to be looking for: information about technological change during the American Civil War. Questions, in other words, make research more efficient.

Our student may want to start that research by seeing what kind of primary sources have been used by other historians of Civil War technology. She can do this by consulting their books and scholarly articles and reading through their bibliographies and footnotes. It is a quick way to get started on her research. But she is not going to want to depend exclusively on other historians' sources. She needs to strike off into the archives on her own. Armed with her question, she can do subject searches in places like the Library of Congress and other online and conventional archives.

Librarians and archivists are also fantastic resources. They know the primary sources in their collections and they are eager to help NHD students identify and use the most appropriate sources for the questions they are asking. Then comes the fun part (and honestly, my favorite part of being a historian): delving into those acid-free boxes or downloading

National History Day maintains an (ever-growing) list of partner organizations who have resources for NHD students. We update it annually. Check out out at <https://www.nhd.org/partner-resources>.

sources from a library or university website. All of those sources are precious treasure chests, brimming with valuable hints and information that could very well provide answers to my research question.

The wider a student's research, the better. Using her research question, the student wants to circle around her topic, asking the same question over and over, but from different directions (ie: perspectives). In the case of our Civil War historian, she may want to ask about different kinds of technology or about Union technology as well as Confederate technology. She may want to ask about technological change on the home front as well as the battlefield. She might want to ask if women and men were differently affected by technological change. She needs to see as many sides of her topic as possible. No historian can know the whole story by only looking at a part of it.

The need to ask her question from many perspectives will often mean that our student will end up digging through different kinds of primary sources: letters, maps, diaries, photographs, newspaper clippings, court cases, and government documents, to name just a few. Each of these sources provides a different angle or view onto the past and allows students to more thoroughly answer their research questions. This is what judges look for when evaluating an entry's bibliography.

STEP THREE: ANALYSIS, OR MAKING SENSE OF THE EVIDENCE

Having used her question to dig all sorts of amazing information out of her primary sources, our student is ready to tackle the third step, which is making sense of all that information. Historians have a saying: "Facts don't speak for themselves, we speak for them." Analysis is where all that talking begins to happen, and one of the first ways we start the process is by organizing the information we gathered into the order in which it was produced.

Arranging our information chronologically is helpful. It allows us to begin to get a sense of causal relationship. For instance, arranging our information in chronological order enables us to better see where a process began and when it ended, and how the in-between pieces connected. Just as importantly, arranging our information in chronological order helps us to put the topic we are studying into its historical context. Context is key to our understanding of the past. We are no more likely to understand the past without reference to the larger context than we are to understand words that have been taken out of a sentence or paragraph.

Arranging and thinking about our information in its chronological order allows us to begin asking what else was going on at the same time that might have bearing on the topic we are studying. This is another place where secondary sources come in handy. Students can use their textbooks and other scholarly books to fill in the context, rummaging through the pages to find out what else was going on that might have bearing on the past we are studying. For instance, our Civil War historian might want to know more about battles, their locations, and the size of the armies involved (battles, after all, need guns and cannons and other forms of technology). Our student might also want to pay attention to any efforts by government to promote new technology, where new factories were built, and when new weapons were developed and by whom. In working up a chronology, she might even discover that new factories followed hot on the heels of large military engagements. Contextual information helps us make sense of (speak for!) our facts.

Contextualization is not all that happens during the analysis phase. This is where students must also ask hard questions of their evidence. When was the document written, by whom was it written, and for what purpose was it written? Where was it written? Who was the intended audience? Who acts in the document, and who does not? Does the author use masculine or feminine pronouns, or does she use both? Historians ask



Good NHD projects lead students to place a topic in historical context, contextualize their evidence, and draw independent conclusions. Courtesy of National History Day.

questions like these in order to distinguish reliable from less-reliable information. We take our sources seriously, but we really do not want to be caught taking them literally. When that happens, it means we have skipped a very important analytical step.

STEP FOUR: ADDING IT UP, OR DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

With research and analysis complete, it is now time to start drawing conclusions. Here again, the question that governed our research and analysis provides a guide as we begin the mental work of adding up all the archival and contextual information we have found. Just as we would never want our physician to overlook or ignore even the smallest scrap of information, we should never allow ourselves (or our students) to overlook or ignore any scrap of information that has come to light through research and analysis. Everything must be taken into account.

Drawing conclusions can be hard work, especially when those conclusions contradict our previously held beliefs. However, historians cannot overlook, ignore, or override any piece of evidence, not even pieces that make us uncomfortable. Intellectual honesty demands nothing less. Suppose, for example, one of our students found evidence that some women flourished during the American Civil War while other women suffered terribly. Any conclusion our student draws must then reflect that ambiguity, or she could narrow her project and argue more simply that a certain group of women (for a certain set of reasons) flourished in war. What she cannot do is

conclude that the Civil War was a triumph for all women. That would be incorrect based on her evidence.

Drawing sound conclusions requires us to be honest with ourselves and honest about our evidence. Sometimes our conclusions take us to unexpected places, and our first inclination might be to resist. There are strategies we can employ that will help our students complete this stage of their projects without violating standards of intellectual or academic integrity. For instance, we can team up our student with a classmate who reads all the evidence she gathered and challenges her to explain how those pieces fit into her reasoning. If her reasoning does not fit her evidence, then we encourage her to adjust her conclusions accordingly.

Teaching with Primary Sources at Middle Tennessee State University has developed a series of graphic organizers that help students draw conclusions, guiding them through a process in which they take into account everything they have discovered during the research and development stages of their NHD projects. Go to https://library.mtsu.edu/ld.php?content_id=43508591 to access these four graphic organizers:

- Main Ideas and Supporting Evidence
- Multiple Perspectives: Point/Counterpoint
- Connecting Ideas Across Texts
- Causes and Effects

STEP FIVE: PACKAGING THE PROJECTS

Remember back at the beginning where I mentioned the distinction Senator Ben Sasse draws between the order of discovery and the order of presentation? Well, we have finally arrived at that stage where students are done discovering and must now prepare to present. As Senator Sasse suggests, presentation does not happen in the same order in which historians discover. If it did, all our students would have to do would be to describe their research and analysis process. Instead, they need to do something different in this final stage. They need to explain the conclusions they drew and what it was they saw in the evidence that led them to their conclusions. In other words, they need to explain their reasoning, not their research.



NHD projects make students into historians, drawing their own conclusions about their topic and presenting their unique argument and point of view. Courtesy of National History Day.



NHD's five project categories encourage students to choose a category that is well-suited to the topic they have selected. Courtesy of National History Day.

This is the point at which many students will determine the most suitable vehicle for conveying that explanation. Is it a paper? A documentary? A performance? A website or an exhibit? For those who previously selected an entry category, this is the point at which they must confirm that their chosen category will effectively convey their research and reasoning, and consider changing categories if that is not the case.

Like everything else having to do with historical thinking, choosing the form the final project takes is not a random act. Entry categories must be a function of the conclusions our students need to explain and the kind of evidence they will use to demonstrate their explanations.

For instance, if we have a student faced with explaining something complex and who will be using textual information, rather than images, to demonstrate his points, a paper might be the most reasonable choice. Papers allow students to use the written word to present their information. On the other hand, if we have a student researching a topic rich in images, an exhibit might be an excellent choice. Exhibits allow students to organize the “before” story, the big event, and the consequences of whatever it was that happened on a museum-like display, using still images and personal analysis to present the results of their research and reasoning.

Documentaries are an ideal option for topics that rely on visual, audio, and cinematic evidence to tell a story. They give students the opportunity to create multimedia presentations that convey

their analysis and conclusions using the sights and sounds of the past. Websites can also be a good way for students to present a variety of still images in combination with short film or audio clips. Because navigation through a website is not necessarily linear, websites allow students to lay out parallel lines of reasoning that are tied together through strategic use of tabs and links.

Finally, there is performance. It can be a great choice for students who want to present a dramatic portrayal of an event by combining historical fact and their own analysis with stage settings, costumes, facial and hand gestures, and body posture.

There is a big point here. None of these choices can be made without students knowing what they need to explain. Just like a doctor must be confident that a course of treatment is appropriate to treat a disease, each NHD student must make certain that his or her choice of entry category will be the best vehicle to present the answer to the historical question they are being asked.

The good news is that by the time a student has worked her way through the first four steps, she will have an answer to her research question, she will have thought her way through her evidence to a sound conclusion, and she will know which bits and pieces of her evidence to use to demonstrate those conclusions. All that will be left for her to do in step five is to present her reasoning (and the best of her evidence) to a team of admiring judges.

TO ACCESS MORE THEME RESOURCES, GO TO [NHD.ORG/THEMEBOOK](https://www.nhd.org/themebook).