Learning Fair - History

Much of the material in this guide is based on work done by the Wisconsin State Historical Society (WSHS) for History Day, a national program for students in middle and high school. Our version for the Learning Fair is scaled appropriate to upper elementary students, and our appreciation extends to the WSHS for inspiration.

PART ONE
RESEARCH

Research is the most important part of creating a History project. Historians depend on research the same way detectives need clues. This is because ideas need evidence in order to convince people of their importance. Unlike detectives, however, History participants get to choose the "case" they will work on when they select their topics.

IDENTIFYING YOUR TOPIC

Selecting a Topic
The key to an effective History project is the combination of a good topic and good sources. Here are some questions to think about when you select a topic to research:
• Does the topic truly interest you? *(Remember you will spend a lot of time researching this topic, so you might want to make a list of things you like or want to know more about.)*
• Can you find enough sources to document the topic?
• Why is this topic important in history? *(What will people learn from your presentation?)*

Narrowing your Topic
A good way to choose a topic is to start with a general area of history you find interesting. This might be information you read about in your textbook, something you saw in a TV program or movie, or something related to family history. Once you define your interest, the next step is to narrow your general ideas into a more focused topic. Here is an example. You are interested in women's history, but realize the topic needs to be narrowed down. Because it is an election year, you decide to research "Women's Voting Rights." However, this topic is still too broad because you have not defined the time and place for your study. At this point one of your group members remembered the silver dollar she got for losing a tooth had a picture of Susan B. Anthony. By making Susan B. Anthony part of your topic you can focus on the rise of women's suffrage (voting rights) movement in the United States during the 1800s. As you work on this topic you may come up with other points for analysis such as comparing the efforts of American women to the suffrage movement in England, or how Susan B. Anthony inspired local women to organize and gain voting rights in their states and communities.

FINDING AND ORGANIZING INFORMATION
Research Strategy
As you start to gather information it is important to have a **research strategy**. A good research strategy has two parts:

1. Finding sources of information - Textbooks, encyclopedias, and other books you can find in your school library are a great place to start. Other sources of basic information can include: City and college libraries, historical societies, national or local archives, interviews, and the Internet.

2. Keeping track of notes and sources - Information is only valuable if you can record it and use it later. One of the best ways to organize your research is to use note cards. Use one set of cards to record **notes and quotes** that you find in your sources. Use another set of cards to record information about your sources that you will need for your **bibliography**. You can buy index cards at office supply stores or discount stores. Look for larger sized cards (5 inches x 8 inches) that have lines for writing. You can buy more than one color to help keep your cards organized.

Sample Note Card
Here is an example of note card about a Wisconsin suffragist named Ada James.
Bibliography Card Note Card
Once you have copied down the important information about your source, you can begin to take notes. Get a new card and write a brief description of the information on the top. Write the source and page number for these notes in the upper right hand corner. In order to avoid **plagiarism**, make sure you note when you have copied down the author's words exactly. In most of your notes you will **paraphrase** the author's text. This means you will write a short summary of the author's ideas in your own words.

> Bibliography Secondary Source Book
> McBride, Genevieve G. On Wisconsin Women. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
>
> - This book contained information about Ada James and her efforts to win voting rights for women. It also described the history of the suffrage movement in Wisconsin.
> - Important pages: 133, 198-204, 207-208
> - Ada James' background McBride, pp. 198-199 and early suffrage ideas
> - Ada James was a second-generation suffragist. She remembered attending suffrage meetings with her grandmother and grandmother.
> - "By 1909, she had helped to found a new and explicitly suffragist organization in Richland Center, the Political Equality Club." (McBride)
> - Ada sent her uncle, a state legislator from Richland Center to the Capital with a goal, to complete "the unfinished work my mother did." (James)

Research Sources

Historians try to find a variety of sources to help them shape an accurate understanding of the past. These include **primary** and **secondary** sources. Both of these types of sources are important to a good historical research project. The following descriptions should help you tell the difference between the two categories of resources.

Primary Sources

Primary sources have a direct relationship to your topic because they:
• were written or produced in the time period you are studying
• are eyewitness accounts of historic events
• are documents related to specific historic events
• are later recollections by participants in historic events

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are the places where you usually begin your research. Secondary sources are usually published books or articles by an author who makes a personal interpretation about a topic based on primary sources. **The writer is not an eyewitness to, or a participant in, the historic event.** Most library books are considered secondary sources, as are encyclopedias. Secondary sources are useful because they provide important background information about your topic. The footnotes and bibliographies of secondary sources will also lead you to primary sources.

Evaluating Sources

The facts of history can be interpreted in many ways depending on the views and opinions of the person who witnesses or studies them. When the subjective views and opinions of the creator influence a source, the source is considered biased. Biased sources are not necessarily bad sources, but as a historian, you will need to be on the lookout for bias so that you can form your own opinion rather than simply repeat the opinions of others. The perceptions of those who witness an event may lead to bias in primary sources, and the beliefs and opinions of historians can create bias in secondary sources. Remember, just because someone has written a book does not mean that his or her interpretation or opinion is the only correct view.

PRIMARY SOURCES	SECONDARY SOURCES
Diaries	Biographies
Autobiographies	Encyclopedias
Government records	History textbooks
Photographs	Media documentaries
Interviews with participants	Interviews with scholars
Manuscript collections	Books about the topic
Newspapers from the era	Articles about the topic
Letters	
Music of the era	
Historic objects	

Finding Sources

The best place to begin your search for sources on your topic is in your school or local library. Although an encyclopedia is a good place to find basic information about your topic and the articles usually list books for further reading, it is important to use encyclopedias only as a means to locate other sources of information. One of the best resources for finding information on your topic is a
LIBRARIAN or MEDIA SPECIALIST. Libraries and media specialists are professional information gatherers and are very helpful in suggesting ways to go about your research. You will also discover that the first few books you find will also help you in your search. Books containing footnotes or a bibliography can provide you with listings of many other sources, both primary and secondary, relating to your topic. Be sure to write these listings down in a notebook or on note cards as "possible sources" so that you can try to find them later. Once you have collected the basic information and sources on your topic, you many want to try to locate some unique sources. At this stage in your research you will be looking for primary sources.

Here are some places to go:
Municipal and College Libraries
Municipal and College libraries have many more resources than school libraries. These libraries are especially helpful because they have primary sources (such as old newspapers) on microfilm that you can use there or make copies to take with you. If you cannot checkout books be sure to bring money for copying!

Historical Societies
If your topic is on Wisconsin history, a historical society may be helpful. State and local historical societies specialize in collecting information about Wisconsin and local communities. In addition to state resources, the Wisconsin Historical Society also has many interesting primary sources on national topics and three world renowned collections: social action, mass communications, and organized labor. This means that there is a wealth of materials on the Civil Rights movement, the protest movements against the Vietnam War, and the reproductive rights/right to life movements. Letters, diaries, photographs, and other documents are but a few of the many materials available for your research. There may be special rules on how you may use some of these materials. It is best to telephone first, or check their website to learn if the society's collections include information about your topic and to confirm the hours and procedures for research. To search the holdings of the Wisconsin Historical Society and to obtain specific information on conducting research there, check out their Website at: *http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/*

Interviews
If your topic is recent enough to include people who are still alive and can provide informed opinions; you may want to conduct interviews with them. Interviewing such people on historical topics is known as oral history. Contact your subject to set up a time and place to meet. Write your questions in advance and be prepared to take notes or record the interview. Know enough about the topic to have specific questions in mind. If you cannot meet with your subject you can send them a few questions to answer, or set up a telephone interview. Remember, they can't say yes if you don't ask!

Your own family

Chances are you might have an ancestor that left photographs, letters, diaries, or other materials that can help you understand more about another point in time. These can be engaging sources that help history come alive. Check with your parents, grandparents, and other relatives. They may have some interesting materials you can use. It may be best to photocopy these materials to avoid any potential damage to these precious memoirs.

The Internet

The Internet has revolutionized the way we access information. For History Day researchers, it offers a wonderful way to do some preliminary exploration of a topic, or to access collections that would normally be out of reach. Information on the Internet, however, varies widely in its quality and reliability. Anyone can create a website and, unlike books, journals, and magazines, there may not be an editor or reviewer to make sure all the information is true. Therefore, it's especially important to evaluate the source of information you find on the Internet. Read secondary sources related to your topic and look and what other historians have to say in addition to Internet research. Ask yourself the following questions about each site you use:

1. What is this site about?
Record its title for citation.
2. Who created this page?
Consider the author's credentials. Record the author's name for citation.
3. Where is the information coming from?
Record the URL for citation.
4. Why is this site on the Web?
Consider how the site's purpose affects the information it offers.
5. When was the page or information created?
Record the created/updated date and your date of visit for citation.
6. How accurate or credible is the page?
If you think an online source is questionable, find the information elsewhere. Most information that's online can also be found offline a library. **Do NOT rely solely on the Internet for research!** Use a variety of primary and secondary sources, including books, diaries, journals, photographs, interviews, articles, etc. Only a fraction of all the existing primary and secondary source materials are available on the Internet. Check out libraries and historical societies to see what else is out there. Many historical societies and universities are digitizing collections of primary source material and making them available online. Check out *www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/historyday/student_resources.asp* to find links to collections like these or ask a librarian or archivist to help you find others.

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?—DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

History projects should do more than just tell a story. Every exhibit should **make a point** about its topic. To do this, you will need to develop your own argument about the historical impact of the person, event, or idea you are studying. The point you make could also be called a **thesis statement.** A thesis statement is not the same as a topic. Your thesis statement expresses your opinion about the impact and significance of your topic. Researchers start out with a topic, but they usually don't have a thesis statement right away. Instead, they develop their thesis over time as they learn more about their topic and make judgments about the evidence they find. A good thesis statement does three things:
• **Addresses a narrow topic**
• **Expresses an opinion**
• **Evaluates significance**

For a demonstration of this process, check out the building of the thesis statement below:

Step 1: "Immigration to Milwaukee."
This is not a thesis statement yet because it doesn't address a specific, narrow issue related to immigration to Milwaukee. What will the project examine? Health and sanitation in immigrant neighborhoods? Labor issues? The polka? There are thousands of immigration topics that a historian could research in Milwaukee. This topic needs to be narrowed quite a bit before it can be used to build a thesis.

Step 2: "Lizzie Black Kander and Jewish immigration to Milwaukee from 1880–1920."
This is a nice and narrow topic, but it's still not a thesis. This phrase expresses no opinion and makes no argument about the significance of Kander and Jewish immigration.

Step 3: "Lizzie Black Kander used her cooking classes and The Settlement Cookbook to teach Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants about American culture."
This sentence is close to a thesis statement, but it isn't quite there yet. The researcher now shows an opinion about the purpose of Kander's work, but still doesn't tell us why the topic is **significant**. What effects did *The Settlement Cookbook* and her cooking classes have? How did Kander's actions change the lives of Jewish immigrants?

Step 4: "Through her cooking classes and The Settlement Cookbook, Lizzie Black Kander introduced Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants to American culture, which helped them assimilate and learn how to avoid ethnic discrimination."
We have a winner! This thesis looks at a narrow topic, expresses an opinion, and evaluates the significance of the topic. A history project based on this thesis statement would discuss Kander's work and show evidence that she helped immigrants assimilate and avoid discrimination.

THE PROCESS STATEMENT AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

History projects also include a process statement and bibliography. This process statement gives your title, tells your topic, explains how you developed your project, and documents your research.

A good title will quickly introduce your topic, but it should help the viewer understand your point of view. Including ideas from the theme in your title also helps to show your topic's connection to it. For example, a title for an entry about Ada James could be: ***Ada James and Voting Rights***.

But a more affective title could be: ***A Force for Higher Civilization: Ada James and the Fight for Women's Voting Rights in Wisconsin*** This title explains the topic and also gives a sense of the argument that Ada James and other suffragists used to argue for their right to vote.

Process Statement

The process paper is a description of your research. It is a list of what you did to research your topic and prepare your project for display.

Bibliography

A **bibliography** is an alphabetized list of sources you used. **Internet sources should also include a description of who sponsors the site.**

A History bibliography should be separated into primary and secondary sources.

Typical Example of Bibliography
Primary Sources

- Commager, Henry Steele, ed. Documents of American History. New York: Meredith Corporation,1968.
- Historical Maps on File. New York: Facts on File Publication, 1984.
- Congress–Senate Records, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. [Online version on August 16, 2001, available through the online catalog at *http://www.nara.gov/nara/nail.html*]
- Thomas Jefferson's Third Annual Message, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents. New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897.

Secondary Sources

- Carruth, Gordon, Editor. American Facts and Dates. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1972.
- DeConde, Alexander. A History of American Foreign Policy. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.
- Stokes, George. Louisiana, The World Book Encyclopedia, 1981, Vol. 10.
- Thomas Jefferson. The White House.
  http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/tj3.html

PART TWO
PRESENTATION
Once you have completed your research you need to design an effective display. The suggestions presented here are not complete; they are only a starting point. Use your creativity and imagination to make your presentation stand out!

Exhibits
Exhibits are designed to display visual and written information on a topic in an easy to understand and attractive manner. Exhibits are not simply collections of material, however. They are carefully designed to tell a story and make an interpretation. To be successful, an exhibit must create an effective balance between visual interest and historical explanation.

After you finish with your research, try making an outline of the main arguments and points you would like to make in your exhibit. This outline will help organize your ideas as you lay out your actual exhibit.

The form of our exhibits is a three-panel display
• Be sure your title is the main focus of the center panel.
• Also use the center panel to present your main ideas.
• The side panels are best used either to compare issues about your topic or explain related details.
• If your topic is presented in chronologically, make sure the sequence works visually on the panels.
•Try to limit the number of your own words if possible. Use your own words sparingly and let the quotations, documents, artifacts, drawings, and photographs demonstrate your thesis.
• Artifacts or other materials may also be placed on the table between the side panels.

More Hints About Exhibit Projects . . .
• Quotations can be an effective way of using historical evidence to support your argument. Sometimes, a quote from the historical figure just says it better than you could say it yourself.

Labeling

- The labels you use for your title and main ideas are very important because they direct the viewer's eye around your project.
- One way to make your labels stand out is to have the writing on a light colored piece of paper with a darker background behind it. This can be done with construction paper, tag board, or mat board. Dark black lettering makes your labels easier to read.
- Photographs and written materials will also stand out more, if you put them on backgrounds as well.
- It is important that you design your project in a way that your photographs, written materials and illustrations are easy to understand and to follow.
- It is always tempting to try to get as much on your panel boards as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. Try to select only the most important items for your project boards. Clarity and organization are the most important goals for this project.