

2020 NATIONAL HISTORY DAY

BREAKING BARRIERS IN HISTORY

NEW YORK CITY HISTORY DAY STUDENT PLANNING GUIDE



Use this guide as you plan, research, and create your History Day Project throughout the year! Although this process may initially seem daunting, if you follow these ten steps you're on your way to an excellent History Day.

Step 1: Understanding the Theme (Suggested timing: September/October)

The 2020 theme for *National History Day* is “**Breaking Barriers in History.**” What is a “**barrier?**” What are the many different ways you could define a “**barrier?**” What are some examples of breaking barriers in history? Brainstorm as many examples as you can.

National History Day has partnered with film maker Ken Burns to create a video discussing this year's theme. Check it out at <https://www.nhd.org/breaking-barriers-history>.

Step 2: Selecting a Topic (Suggested Timing: October/November)

One of the first steps in starting your History Day project will be to choose a topic. The key is to start big and then narrow it down. We suggest the following steps:

First, brainstorm a list of broad historical topics or time periods that interest you personally (e.g. the environment, women's rights, the civil rights movement, the Revolutionary War, etc.). Skim through your textbook, talk to family and community members, and ask your teacher(s) for help if you're having trouble brainstorming.

Second, conduct preliminary research in the library or online to see what *more specific* topics you can find within those broad fields. Here are some tips and ideas below:

Places to look for more specific topics:

- Your textbook! Skim the table of contents and any images or texts to see what catches your eye.
- Local historical society and museum websites (it's always fun to focus on history in your own backyard—each borough of New York has its own historical society with helpful online resources).
- Museum of the City of New York's Collections Portal (<https://collections.mcny.org/>)
- Smithsonian Learning Labs (<https://learninglab.si.edu/>)
- New-York Historical Society (<https://www.nyhistory.org/>)

Example of a broad starting topic: Asian American History

Example of a more narrow topic: Labor Organizing among Asian American Garment Workers

Don't forget to consider how your topic relates to the theme of “Breaking Barriers in History”!

Step 3: Developing Research Questions (Suggested Timing: October/November)

Determine central questions about your topic that relate to the theme. The questions should address what you can learn about your topic through research. Here are some examples of how to turn a topic into a research question.

Topic: Labor Organizing among Asian American Garment Workers

- Research Question: How did Asian American women's labor organizing impact workplace conditions?

Topic: Civil Rights and School Desegregation

- Research Question: How did young people participate in the movement to desegregate public schools in New York City?

Now is also a good time to start thinking about what category of project you would like to create: historical paper, exhibit board, documentary, performance, or website. For information about each of these categories, visit <https://www.nhd.org/categories>.

Step 4: Finding Primary and Secondary Sources (Suggested Timing: November/December)

You will need to find evidence to answer your research question. This evidence will be comprised of both primary and secondary sources. Here's how to begin collecting that evidence:

Start with Secondary Sources

Begin by referring to encyclopedias, history textbooks, and library books to find an overview of your topic. Reputable online sources can also help. These sources should ultimately help you develop a **bibliography** (the list of secondary sources you use to learn about your topic and time period). Once you develop an initial list (around 5-10 secondary sources), you can start reading and taking notes.

Pro-tip: It's ok if these sources tell you about just *one* aspect of your larger project topic. For example, you'll need to know about the civil rights movement in general even if you're focusing on youth activism and school desegregation in particular. It's also a good idea to read the sections in your textbook that tell you about your time period. So if youth activism and civil rights is your issue, what else was happening in the 1950s and 1960s that may help you understand your topic better?

Look for Primary Sources

Historians use primary sources to find out what happened in the past and make arguments about history. **A primary source is an original document, artifact, or account that was created during the time period you are studying. Secondary sources are the accounts historians write based on primary sources.**

A major step of your project will be to find and analyze primary sources about your topic. Perhaps you already found some exciting sources as you were narrowing down your topic!

Here are some places to find primary sources, which can be written texts (letters, laws, newspaper accounts, diaries, etc.), photographs, maps, oral history recordings or transcripts, political cartoons, or artifacts found on a museum collections portal:

- **MCNY Collections Portal** (<https://collections.mcny.org/>)
- **National Archives “Docs Teach”** (<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/documents>)
- **Smithsonian Learning Lab** (<https://learninglab.si.edu/>)
- **Brooklyn Historical Society Oral History Collection** (<https://oralhistory.brooklynhistory.org/>)
- **Centro-Archive of the Puerto Rican Diaspora** (<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/>)
- **The Center for Jewish History – History Day Guide** (<http://libguides.cjh.org/Breaking-Barriers>)
- **National Museum of African American History – History Day Collections Portal** (<https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/nhd-at-nmaahc-collection-breaking-barriers-in-history/bBo9wJam1G0FyuKH#r>)

Remember to reach out to the research librarian, archivist, or education department at your local historical society, or nearby archives, universities, or museums. NYU Libraries has compiled a list of NYC-area archives and research institutions at https://guides.nyu.edu/ld.php?content_id=11148386.

Step 5: Drafting a (Working) Thesis Statement: (Suggested Timing: November/December)

Thesis statements present an argument or a point of view about a topic based on your primary and secondary sources. **Your thesis should be an answer to your central research question and tell us why your project is important.** Remember that your initial thesis statement—your “working” thesis statement—will change as you do more research and reading, and that’s ok! Here are a few tips for developing a strong working thesis statement, which should be 1-3 sentences long:

- Strong thesis statements answer the big five “W” questions: who, what, when, where, and why?
- So what? Your thesis statement should convince people that your topic is significant – that everyone should know about your topic.
- Thesis statements are not facts.
- Good thesis statements provide a “roadmap” for the historical narrative that follows.
- Your thesis statement should address the theme of “Breaking Barriers in History.”
- For more guidance, check out these resources from the U.S. Department of Education:
 - [What a thesis statement is](#)
 - [What a thesis statement does](#)
 - [Putting the thesis statement to work](#)

Not a great thesis statement: Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the New Deal. It helped a lot of people.

This thesis statement tells us a fact, and starts to tell us why the New Deal was important. But it doesn’t answer all the “W” questions, and is not specific enough. It also does not give us a “roadmap” for what to expect in the paper/project to follow.

A great thesis statement: In response to the stock market crash of 1929, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced a revolutionary “New Deal.” This government initiative brought reform to the U.S. banking system and helped get Americans back to work. Roosevelt’s goal of restoring economic stability would go unmet, however, until the country mobilized for war.

It’s easy to identify the who, what, when, where, and why of this thesis. We also get a sense of why the New Deal was important and what impact it had (“so what?”).

Step 6: Continue Analyzing Primary Sources: (Suggested Timing: December/January)

Once you have drafted a working thesis statement, continue conducting archival research in person and/or online with digitized sources. Remember to always fully evaluate your sources. As you go, use these helpful tools for analyzing primary sources.

- [Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool](#)
- [National Archives Document Analysis Worksheets](#) (for younger students or intermediate/secondary students).

Common Question: How many sources are enough? Some projects engage in a very close reading of just one or two primary sources. Others might cite 10-20 primary sources. There is no right number of sources to include. You will have “enough” sources when you are able to confidently answer your research question and provide evidence to fully support your argument.

Step 7: Re-evaluating the Thesis: (Suggested Timing: December/January)

After reading more sources, review the working thesis statement you drafted and make revisions. Did you find any new evidence that will change your argument or the focus of the project? After spending more time with the primary sources, would you still make the same argument, or do you feel differently about your answer to the research question? Don't forget to workshop your thesis with your teacher and classmates.

Step 8: Create an Outline: (Suggested Timing: December/January)

Will you write a historical paper, create an exhibit board, produce a documentary, put on a performance, or create a website? After you determine the type of project you'll be creating, think about the order in which you will present your argument and evidence. Also, remember to incorporate an engaging intro and conclusion. Make final selections of which primary and secondary sources best support your thesis.

Step 9: Organizing and Designing the Project: (Suggested Timing: January/February)

How will you convey your information? Compose a draft of your project, and plan to revise it several times for focus, clarity and coherence. Think about how you will combine written text and visuals to illustrate your thesis and how your overall presentation will help guide the viewer/reader through your argument. For more advice related to your project category, consult the *National History Day* website (<https://www.nhd.org/categories>).

Step 10: Recapping your Work: (Suggested Timing: January/February)

Write a process paper and an annotated bibliography (<https://www.nhd.org/annotated-bibliography>) and prepare for your interview with judges. The process paper should explain your approach to your research and how you selected your topic and category. Your bibliography should cite and annotate all the sources you used. Practice your presentation with a few different audiences (friends, family, and teachers) before the big day!

More questions? Visit mcny.org/historyday or email nychistoryday@mcny.org.

Enjoy New York City History Day on March 1st!
