

Kansas History Day Resource Manual

Research Techniques

and

Project Presentation



Produced by the Kansas State Historical Society with the help of the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the University of Minnesota.

History Day Manual

Introduction

The key to an effective History Day entry is the combination of a good topic with a wide range of good sources. The source material for historical research is an endless collection of books, letters, speeches, photographs, documents, oral interviews, etc. Some topics chosen by students have more resources available than others. Naturally a figure like Dwight Eisenhower will have a great deal more written about him than a Kansas farmer. This does not mean, however, that Eisenhower is a better topic than the farmer. It may be difficult, for example, to put a fresh perspective on Eisenhower's life as so much has been written already. On the other hand you could give good insight into the life of an individual farmer through diaries and letters. Whatever topic you choose it should be one where primary and secondary sources are available.

Primary Sources

A **primary source** is one produced around the time of the event you are studying. Examples include letters, speeches, diaries, original film, newspaper articles from the time, interviews, photographs, and documents. These sources are very important as they give insight into the point of view of an event at the time it occurred.

Secondary Sources

A **secondary source** is one produced some time after an event has taken place. It is usually based on primary sources. Examples include school textbooks, encyclopedias, movies based on historical events, and dramas. These sources are important as they show how people have formed their opinions about historical events over time.

Interpretation of Sources

To interpret both **primary** and **secondary** sources you need to ask questions to evaluate the materials you are using.

For example:

1. Who wrote the source?
2. Who published the source?
3. Where and when was it written?
4. Why was it written?

5. Is it a private piece of information (a diary) or was it meant for publication/propaganda purposes?
6. What was the motive behind its publication? (money, political gain, propaganda, self-justification)
7. What is the bias of the source?
8. Does the source contain opinions?
9. Does the source contain useful facts?
10. How useful to your project is the information in this source?

Remember that just because a source contains bias or opinion, that does not make it useless. It actually gives you a point of view you might not find elsewhere. If you were studying Nazi Germany, for example, you would be wrong to ignore sources containing propaganda as they reveal useful information about the Nazi's ideas. Therefore, you don't have to believe in your sources to make them useful. An excellent approach is to compare and cross-reference your sources so that you have a wide range of facts and opinions available to you. This should ensure that your project remains fair, balanced, and well-researched.

How to Find Basic Source Material

The best place to begin your search for sources on your topic is in your school and local library. Encyclopedias are a good place to find basic information and they usually contain good book lists (bibliographies). You should not use more than one encyclopedia; if you do you will not impress the judges. Use the card catalog to find books related to your subject and use the bibliographies within those books to widen your own list.

Librarians are often the greatest source of information as they can tell you where to find certain books and offer alternative ideas if you can't find a particular book. Some libraries are involved in the interlibrary loan program where they lend books to each other. Libraries can also put a hold on a book if someone else has it checked out so you can get the book next.

Advanced Source Material

Municipal and College Libraries

These contain primary sources such as old newspapers (usually on microfilm). Useful sources can also be found in the special collections in these libraries. They will also have a wider selection of books, and interlibrary loan programs are more common. They

also have copies of journals and periodicals, which may contain articles relevant to your project. Again, you may need the help of the librarian to locate these, but don't be afraid to ask.

Historical Societies

If your topic is on Kansas history then you might consider calling on your local historical society. The state, county, and local historical societies specialize in collecting information about Kansas and local communities. They have many letters, diaries, photographs, maps, and documents. It is always polite to notify the society that you would like to visit; this will ensure that they can be ready for you when you arrive.

At the Kansas State Historical Society students are encouraged to use the research collections. Orientation tours on the use of the research collections are available. Students unable to come to Topeka may borrow some of the Society's microfilm holdings through the interlibrary loan program. Specific questions can be sent to the research center, but they are unable to research very general or vague questions.

Interviews

To conduct a successful interview you need more than fresh batteries in your tape recorder. Once you have decided on a subject for your project you will need to find people who can tell you about their experiences. You will then need to contact those people, do background research on your subject and the people you will be interviewing, and prepare a series of questions.

Choosing Informants

Deciding who to interview will be easy for some topics. The people you interview are called **informants**. If you are researching the life of an individual you should try to talk to that person. If you can't interview the person, contact friends or relatives who have memories to share with you. To learn more about a particular event, you will need to find people who observed or participated in that event.

Asking for an Interview

When you contact people to ask for an interview, let them know whether you plan to write down their answers or record them. **Being recorded makes some people feel very uncomfortable.** Be prepared to take notes by hand if your informants do not wish to be recorded. You should also tell them how you plan to use the information gathered from the interview. Explain to them about History Day and other research you have been doing.

When you arrange your interview, set a date and time that is convenient for your informants, and tell them approximately how long the interview will last. Allow your

informants to choose a location where they will be as relaxed and comfortable as possible during the interview.

Sometimes your contacts will want to be interviewed with a third person on hand. The extra person may be someone who has valuable information about your topic, but try to arrange a separate interview if you can. Try to avoid interviewing two or more people simultaneously until you have gained some experience.

Writing the Questions

Decide on the questions you want to explore in your interviews based on what you know about your subject and any background research you are able to do. Twenty thoughtful questions should be enough for an hour-long interview. Your interview should not be more than an hour and a half long. If you need more time, schedule a second interview. Put your questions in order before the interview. Begin with simple, fact-finding questions; later questions can be more complex as you learn more about the individual's experiences and opinions.

Be aware that how you phrase a question can affect the answer you receive. Avoid questions that will give you a yes or no answer. Your goal is to gain as much useful information as possible. This can be done by using phrases such as "Why?," "What?," and "How?" at the beginning (or at the end) of your questions.

Conducting the Interview

When you arrive (ON TIME) for the interview you will want to take a few minutes to tell your informant a little about yourself and your project. You can do this while you set up your tape recorder in a convenient spot. After you have done a sound check (to make sure the tape recorder is working properly) you will be ready to begin.

Everyone has their own style of interviewing, but a few general guidelines will help you to conduct a more relaxed and productive interview.

1. Bring something to write on, even if you are recording the interview. Make notes about comments you would like to follow up on, about the setting of the interview, or anything else that will not be recorded on tape. (An informant might show you a useful photograph, for example).
2. Don't worry if you find yourself searching for the right word occasionally. Sometimes it's good to let your informants know that they are not the only ones struggling to accurately express themselves.
3. Don't allow your attention to wander. In a one-on-one interview the other person will notice.

4. Pauses in your conversation will naturally occur. You will need to observe your informants closely to be able to tell whether they have completed their answers, or if they are giving your question further thought.
5. Like all conversations, interviews have a tendency to wander. While you shouldn't allow them to stray too far from your outline don't worry if an interview takes some unexpected turns. The information you gain may turn out to be valuable, and you can always politely return to your original outline.
6. Watch carefully for signs of fatigue from your informants, especially if they are elderly. Take breaks when they are needed, and end the interview if you feel it is necessary. You should leave the informants with a positive feeling about the interview and looking forward to a second meeting if you need to schedule one.

After the Interview

Take some time to write down your impression of the interview as soon as you have a quiet moment. This will be useful to you later in your project as you try to look back objectively on what you learned from the interview.

Listen to your tape and, using the tape counter as a guide, make notes on the location of different topics you discussed. For instance, from 0 – 40 the informant spoke about his or her childhood, while from 40 – 75 his or her first job as the topic, and so on.

If you use the interview in your History Day presentation, you will need to give a citation in your bibliography.

EXAMPLE: Ian Smith, personal interview by Joseph Marsden, August 25, 1991.

Alternatives to Interviewing

The best approach is usually fact to face, but as this is not always possible due to distance or reluctance of the subject to meet with you, these alternatives have proven successful.

1. If the person is a stranger, you might send a letter describing your project and how they would be helpful to your research. The interview could be conducted over the telephone.
2. You could send out a questionnaire to be completed.
3. You could ask friends of your informants for information.

Exhibits

Exhibits are designed to display visual and written information on a topic in an easy to understand and attractive manner. These exhibits are similar to exhibits in a museum where people walking by are attracted to the main idea and stop to learn more about the topic. To be successful, an exhibit must create an effective balance between visual interest and historical explanation.

Three Panel Display

The most common type of exhibit entry is a three-panel display, similar to the illustration below. This style is the least complicated to design and build, but is still a very effective way to present your information.

Guidelines to Follow

1. Be sure your title is the main focus of the center panel.
2. Also use your center panel to present your main ideas.
3. The side panels are best used to either compare ideas about your theme or explain related details.
4. Artifacts or other materials may also be placed on the table between the side panels.
5. The overall size of the project, when properly displayed, must be no larger than 40 inches wide, 30 inches deep, and 6 feet high.
6. Media devices can be used in this category, but they must not run for more than 3 minutes. Judges should be able to control media devices when a student is not present.

Three Dimensional Display

A three dimensional project is more complicated to construct but it can be especially effective for explaining themes where change over time is important. Like the three panel display one side should contain your title and main theme. As you move around the project the development of your topic can be explored. It is not necessary to have the project itself be able to spin and you may set the project on the table or floor for people to walk around. Remember to try and keep the title and key ideas at eye-level.

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 matte board. Black lettering will make your labels easier to read. Labels should convey significant points and information. This should be done in a clear and concise way. **Interpretations should be included on your labels;** they should not just be used to identify objects and images.

Project Design

Though you will be able to explain your project during the initial judging, a successful project entry **must be able to explain itself**. So it is important that you design your project in such a way that your photographs, written materials, and illustrations are easy to understand and follow.

It is always tempting to try and get as much onto your project as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. Try to select only the most important items for your project boards and place other information in a binder on the table. **Remember that strong historical interpretation is critical for a good project.**

Performances

Entries in this category must have a dramatic appeal, **but not at the expense of historical information**. Creativity is the key here and students must make effective use of their 10-minute time allowance. Students will be allowed an additional 5 minutes to set up and 5 minutes to remove any props needed for the performance.

Guidelines to Follow

1. Don't jump right in and start writing a script. Take time to do proper research, and then brainstorm general ideas and the ways they might be presented.
2. When you write your script make sure it contains references to the historical evidence you found in your research. Using actual dialogue, quotations, or taking excerpts from speeches are good ways to do this.
3. Don't get carried away with props. Content is the most important factor. Props, if used, should be directly related to the theme. Remember you have only 5 minutes to put up and take down any props you use.
4. Good costumes help make you convincing, be sure they are appropriate to your topic. (For example, don't use a World War II helmet in a play about the Civil War.)

5. Make sure you practice your performance so that everyone involved knows exactly what they are to do. During your performance make sure that each person's voice is loud and clear. A good performance can be lost if the audience cannot hear properly. Also remember that it is very important not to rush through your performance.
6. Be prepared for questions after your performance. The judges will want to know about your research, use of primary sources, any difficulties you had, and they will ask specific questions about your chosen topic.

Documentaries

The availability of home video cameras has increased the popularity of this form of entry. If you are able to use editing equipment in your school, this can be a good educational project.

Guidelines to Follow

1. Remember that a student, not the teacher, must operate both the camera and editing equipment.
2. Be sure to draw a storyboard of the scenes you will be shooting.
3. Keep track of scenes in a notebook to make editing easier.
4. Music can be used with your narrative to produce an effective soundtrack.
5. A variety of shots, interviews, live action, and still subjects, can be presented.
6. Keep to the theme of your topic; don't gloss over your material with special effects. **Remember that historical interpretation of your sources is more important than a presentation that looks good but has no substance.**

Slide Presentations

Although the use of videotape is growing in this category, slide presentations are still a popular and effective media. Slides can either be purchased or photographed by students. The key to an effective entry is a good combination of visual images, recorded narrative, and **strong historical interpretation.**

Guidelines to Follow

1. Make a storyboard of the type of images you want to use to explain your theme. A storyboard is a set of drawings depicting in sequence the important scene changes in a film.

2. You can photograph pictures from books and other sources to build your slide collection. Remember to give credit in your bibliography and check copyright laws.
3. Avoid too much repetition.
4. Music can be an important addition to your recorded narrative.
5. Make sure your narrative is clear and fits with the image on the screen.
6. It is better to use all horizontal or all vertical slides as a mixture can cause confusion.
7. Remember the time for presentations is limited to 10 minutes with an additional 5 minutes to set up and 5 minutes to remove equipment needed.

Papers

Putting together a research paper requires you to use skills that will be very useful to you no matter what you do later in life. A research paper requires three basic steps after you have chosen your topic:

1. Collect information.
2. Organize the collected information.
3. Present the information in a way to inform and persuade the reader of your paper.

Common Questions

1. What is a footnote or endnote?

A footnote (or endnote) is an explanation by the writer that they are using ideas or quotations in the paper that are not their own. Footnotes serve not only to give credit to the originators of ideas, but also serve as evidence in support of your statements.

There are three typical situations when footnotes are used:

- a. Quoting a secondary source – if you take a direct quotation from someone's book you must footnote it.
- b. Paraphrasing a source – even if you change an author's ideas into your own words you must footnote this information. This is usually done at the end of a paragraph or section of information.

- c. Quoting a primary source – an example of this would be including a selection from a speech or an interview in your paper.

EXAMPLE:

When talking about racism in America it has been pointed out that black Americans had a “powerful tool in their struggle.”¹ The powerful tool was the U. S. Constitution which proclaimed equality for all.² What was it we asked for; “the ballot, give us the ballot.”³

¹ Gunner Myrdel, An American Dilemma. p. 1004

² H. Brogan, History of the U.S.A. p. 649

³ Martin Luther King, speech made in Washington, D.C.

2. What is a bibliography?

This is a list of the materials you have used in your research. It should be annotated, which means after the title of the book you should include a sentence or two explaining what the book was about or why you found it useful.

EXAMPLE:

Fuller, R. Buckminster, Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity. New York: Bantam Books, 1969.

The author feels we will be able to solve our problems using information and energy. I found this to be a fresh insight on the topic and full of convincing argument.

3. How long does the paper have to be?

History Day papers are 1,500 to 2,500 words in length.

4. Must the papers be typed?

No, but they look better. You can have someone type yours for you. It should be presented on 8 ½ x 11 paper with 1-inch margins on all sides. Pages must be numbered consecutively and double spaced.

5. Should papers be stapled?

Yes, in the top left corner only, with no cover.