Exhibiting History
It’s More Than a Display Board!

Chicago Metro History Fair
Updated 2018
Think of the History Fair exhibit as a mini-museum.
Before Design Begins

• Make an outline, write text, and do a layout before one finger touches an exhibit board!

• Show your draft to others to make sure it is logical to them.
Parts of an Exhibit:

An introduction and a conclusion

Primary Sources as Evidence

A Title

Subtitles

Labels: The Students’ Interpretation

Secondary Sources as Evidence
The first elements the visitor sees are:

1. Overall design
2. Title
3. Introduction
Exhibit Design

• The maximum dimensions for an exhibit are 72” tall by 40” wide by 30” deep.

• The three-panel exhibit is the most common form but it is not required.
Like a museum, the goal of a History Fair exhibit is to effectively communicate the curator’s interpretation. That takes organization and imagination.
The design reflects the topic of the project...
...and is visually interesting.
Design delivers the message

• Choose colors that reflect the topic of the exhibit. This exhibit is about child labor. Why did the students select these colors? Review the earlier exhibits presented here. Do the colors fit the topic?

• Notice different color mats for different parts of the exhibit.
What topics could these colors symbolize?
Fonts Reflect the Story Too

Select fonts that reflect the topic too. Use 3 different font sizes based on the importance of text: consider the larger fonts (36+) for the subtitles and title.

• History Fair
• History Fair
• History Fair
• History Fair
• History Fair
Always use readable styles and black type for labels: 16-24 font size

Look at the actual sizes in different styles. Which is more readable?

- Use readable styles and black type for labels: 16-24 font size
- Use readable styles and black type for labels: 16-24 font size
Avoid too few or too many words--neither communicates effectively
Superior design is the supporting partner of superior academic work.
The Title Sends Your Message

Make the title snappy and informative, and hint at the argument viewers will find in the exhibit.
Why do some titles communicate more effectively than others?

- Impact and Influence of Lemont on the Civil War
- The Memorial Day Massacre
- The War Comes Home: How Small Towns Fought the Civil War
- “They Shot Us in Our Backs”: How the Memorial Day Massacre Galvanized the Labor Movement
The introduction is the road map to the exhibit.
The introduction establishes:

- context
- change
- significance or impact

and contains your *thesis statement*. 
The largest label on the exhibit, the introduction will consist of approximately 100 words.
There is no need to write “Thesis” or “Introduction” if the design makes it apparent. Consider using a different color matting, font size, or shape.
A strong thesis statement:

- Makes a specific argument or interpretation
- Has a narrow focus
- Based on & can be “proven” with evidence
- Can be communicated in one or two sentences
FOR EXAMPLE:

After the 1919 riot, the means of enforcing segregation became more accepted, more formal, often more violent, and completely legal.
The race riot of 1919 was a cataclysmic event in Chicago. After five days of rioting, 38 white and black citizens were killed and 537 were injured. The riot itself was the product of nearly two decades of conflict between whites and blacks over housing, jobs, and political representation. Before the riot, the black community was pressed into separate areas of the city by informal and extralegal means. After the riot the means of enforcing segregation became more accepted, more formal, often more violent, and completely legal. In this way the 1919 riot was a turning point for the city Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “most segregated in the nation.”
• **CONTEXT:** The race riot of 1919 was a cataclysmic event in Chicago. After five days of rioting, 38 white and black citizens were killed and 537 were injured. The riot itself was the product of nearly two decades of conflict between whites and blacks over housing, jobs, and political representation.

• **CHANGE:** Before the riot, the black community was pressed into separate areas of the city by informal and extralegal means.

• **THESIS:** After the riot the means of enforcing segregation became more accepted, more formal, often more violent, and completely legal.

• **IMPACT:** In this way the riot of 1919 was a turning point for the city Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “most segregated in the nation.”
The exhibit layout is organized by sections, or segments, which present the interpretation.

(Just like the walls of a museum exhibit.)
Most segments contain:

- Subtitle
- Label(s)
- Primary Sources
- Secondary Sources
Segments are like sections in a museum or paragraphs of a paper. The subtitle, interpretive label(s) and a variety of sources all connect to tell the story.
Subtitles are Guideposts

Subtitles guide the viewer through the exhibit and establish the main points of the argument.
Revolutionary thinkers, affirming the right to childhood, denounced child labor as exploitation. Settlement workers promoted childhood as a unique stage in life in which an individual’s personality could be developed through creative play, introduction to the arts, and a proper education. Muckrakers, pioneering doctors, and labor union organizers publicized the evils of child labor.

- Labels consist of 50-75 words that develop the interpretation in organized clusters of claims and evidence.
- Each label communicates one main idea.
Strong labels:

• Focus on one claim at a time
• Use active verbs
• Explain and analyze the primary sources
• Move the story forward
In each segment of the exhibit, the sources directly relate to the label text.
How do the following sources relate to this label?

Revolutionary thinkers, affirming the right to childhood, denounced child labor as exploitation. Settlement workers promoted childhood as a unique stage in life in which an individual’s personality could be developed through creative play, introduction to the arts, and a proper education. Muckrakers, pioneering doctors, and labor union organizers publicized the evils of child labor.
Investigative reports, hearings, laws, executive orders not only make sound evidence, but they also help place your story in the larger national context.
Posters and Flyers….

Publications from the time reveal much about the past: the people who were trying to communicate, the audience they tried to reach, and the message they wanted to deliver.
... Editorial Cartoons
To be more than a visual image, sources with a lot of text either need an inset quotation to highlight the most important words, or be reflected in the label. *Inset quotations are far better than highlighting text in an article!*
Photographs

Photographs are more than pictures--they are evidence for the interpretation.

*What can be found in these photos?*
“Many women keep their children from school to run the factory and to help with the homework. In order to earn anything and provide food for themselves…."

Reverend Dunne, 1897

- Quotes from primary sources bring the actual “voices” from the past and can be powerful sources of evidence.
- From secondary sources they reinforce or add to your argument.
Charts, Maps, Graphs, Tables

These sources help organize and display a lot of information better than text could do. They also add to the visual quality of the exhibit.
Put them all together…
...and you have a mini-museum!
Remember: a successful History Fair exhibit is the product of:

• in-depth research,
• a clear interpretation,
• interesting and relevant sources, and a compelling story,
• and a visual design and layout that reinforces your message.
A Gallery of History Fair Exhibits
RICHARD NICKEL

THE DEBATE THAT BROUGHT BUILDINGS DOWN
The construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway destroyed Chicago communities and acted as a physical barrier between the wealthy white neighborhoods and the less privileged minority neighborhoods.
Jewish Immigration to Chicago: The Evolution of Maxwell Street

The Early Years

Daily Life and Business Outside the Market

Maxwell St

New Out, African-Americans and Mexicans In
A MIGHTY HARD STRUGGLE IN A SWEATED INDUSTRY

The Chicago Garment Workers' Strike of 1910 and Reform in the Chicago Garment Industry
The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Equal Working Rights for All.
Visit our website
www.chicagohistoryfair.org

For more creative and practical exhibit design tips and worksheets.
Thanks to all the students whose work made this presentation possible!

Thanks to the Chicago History Museum for permitting use of images from its 2005 exhibit “Teen Chicago.”
Produced by Chicago Metro History Education Center for individual or classroom use.

2014

This presentation may NOT be used for any commercial purpose.