Five Steps for a Successful History Fair Project

1. Find Your Topic
2. Ask Questions and Develop your Thesis
3. Conduct Research and Analyze your Sources
4. Develop your Argument
5. Tell Us Your Story!

Updated for the 2020-21 season
Step 1: Find Your Topic!

- You can find topics in many ways:
  - What current events or issues concern you?
  - What time period or place do you find most intriguing?
  - Are there parts of your community or your identity you want to explore?

- Be sure your topic connects to the annual theme: “Communication in History: The Key to Understanding”

- Where to look for ideas:
  - CMHF Theme and Topics page (includes Chicago-related topics list)
  - Your local community
  - Museums and cultural organizations
Make sure your topic is History Fair Ready!

Things to consider:

1. Can your topic be argued or interpreted?
2. Does your topic use the NHD theme?
3. Is it in the past? Does it show change over time?
4. Is it historically significant?
5. Does it have a variety of available sources?
6. Are you passionate about the topic?
Invest Time in Finding and Narrowing your Topic

Although you may only have a very broad topic at this stage, you will continue to narrow your topic as you do more and more research.

This year’s theme is “Communication in History: The Key to Understanding.”

I love TV!

Hey, I didn’t know that Chicago was famous for its television programs in the 1950s. Wow!

What impact did Chicago’s earliest TV shows have on the way television is produced then and now?

Chicago’s earliest television shows in the early 1950s were some of the very first in the nation to be unscripted and to speak directly to viewers at home. This changed the way programs were made around the country and led to today’s reality and unscripted television trends.

“Working” or “Draft” Thesis

As you research, you will continue to narrow your topic and adjust your thesis!
Step 2
Ask a Question and Develop your Thesis

Asking questions is a great way to spark your research process!

- Check out our Research Questions worksheet

At this point, you will probably begin to think about your thesis. Your thesis is your interpretation about your topic, why it happened, and why it was important. Your thesis should also show how your topic connects to the Communication in History theme.

- Read more about Thesis Statements here
- Developing your Thesis

Your thesis will continue to change as you conduct more and more research.
A Strong Thesis:

- Takes a stand -- makes a specific argument or interpretation
- Has a narrow and specific focus
- Based on & can be supported with evidence
- Explains historical impact, significance, or change over time, and
- You know you have a thesis if someone else could make a different argument
Historical Question: “Did early Chicago TV change the way stories were communicated with the general public?”

Draft Thesis: “The Chicago School of Television changed the way in which stories were communicated to audiences, by using showing live performers.”

Final Thesis: “The Chicago School of Television’s pioneering style in the ‘50s broke down barriers between the audience and performers. TV was no longer “radio with pictures” or a “play on air” but an entirely new way of interacting with unseen viewers. This allowed television to communicate and convey messages in a more direct and intimate setting.”
Step 3
Conduct Research and Analyze your Sources

- Start with reference materials like The Encyclopedia of Chicago to find background information on your topic and lead you to more sources
  - DO include encyclopedias in your bibliography as a secondary source
  - DO NOT cite specific information from the encyclopedia. Use it only for background knowledge and to lead you to more sources.
  - https://youtu.be/H4jNMojbwtw
- You can then move on to secondary sources like documentary films, authored books, museum exhibits, etc.
- Finally, specialized academic articles and primary sources
  - For example, you can conduct research at local archives

Find as many different sources on your topic as you can. Don’t stop once you find a good, reliable source. Keep building your evidence with other sources, whether they agree or disagree with one another.

Ready to get started? Our CMHF Research page has tons of links for you to begin your research with high-quality online sources!
Analyzing your Sources

As you find and work with sources, you will need to analyze them. Analyzing your sources simply means asking questions of your source.

Taking Notes

Each time you find a source that helps you understand your topic, write it down!

- Write down the details like title, author, URL, etc. so that you can create your citation and find it later.
- Also write down how it helped you understand your topic or what specific facts you learned.

Every History Fair project will need an annotated bibliography that includes every source that you used in your research, with a note about how you used it. Taking notes as you go will make this process MUCH easier!
Primary vs. Secondary Sources

**PRIMARY SOURCES**
The creator of a primary source was an actual participant in or a contemporary of a historical moment. The purpose of primary sources is to capture the words, the thoughts and the intentions of the past. Primary sources help you to interpret what happened and why it happened.

Examples of primary sources include: documents, artifacts, historic sites, songs, or other written and tangible items created during the historical period you are studying.

**SECONDARY SOURCES**
A secondary source was not created first-hand by someone who participated in the historical era and can be written years or centuries after the event. Secondary sources are usually created by historians based on their reading of primary sources.

An example of a secondary source is *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* by James M. McPherson, published in 1988. Secondary Sources are a great starting point in helping you see the big picture. Understanding the context of your topic will help you make sense of the primary sources that you find.

Be sure to separate Primary and Secondary sources on your Annotated Bibliography!
Now that you have found a lot of great information in your sources, you will need to synthesize—or, connect—your sources and information to make your historical argument that backs up your thesis.

• Our Organize your Argument handout can help!

Just like a historian, keep these things in mind when making decisions about what is important enough to include in the story:

- Causes and effects
- What changed over time?
- Why and how did events develop as they did?
- What was the impact?
- So what? Why does this history matter today?
Step 4
Develop Your Argument

Make connections between your primary and secondary sources

Your Historical Argument is a series of Claims backed up by Evidence
Claims = each major point you make in order to have us understand and believe your argument which you will back up with evidence.

Every claim is supported by several sources. These sources and your interpretation of them are your Evidence.

*Think of a claim as a “topic sentence.”*
Putting it Together

You can be creative in how you put your argument together, but many students find the following template for building their argument useful:

1. Introduction
   - Tell viewers what to expect as they review the rest of your project
   - Include your thesis statement

2. Background & Historical Context
   - Where and when did your topic happen?
   - How was the world different then? How was it the same?

3. Build-up/Conflict
   - What conflict or problem sparked your topic?
   - Who are the major characters involved and why?

4. What happened?
   - Clearly explain the who, what, where, and when of your topic
   - Provide multiple perspectives and accounts of your topic

5. What changed and why?
   - Provide your interpretation of the “why” of your topic
   - What direct impact did it have on the people involved?

6. Long-term effects
   - What lasting effects did your topic have into the future?
   - How does your topic still matter today?
   - Where can someone go to do or learn more about your topic?
Visit the History Fair website www.chicagohistory.org/historyfair to find more guidelines, samples, and the rules for each category.
Choose a category that will communicate your topic most effectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibits</th>
<th>Documentaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Lots of visual sources</td>
<td>• Know how or would like to learn how to use recording and editing equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Excellent, tight writing</td>
<td>• Want to write a script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Graphic design &amp; creativity</td>
<td>• Topic has lots of visual sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Easy to follow</td>
<td>• Topic has audio sources (interviews, music)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organized like a mini-museum</td>
<td>• Individuals or group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individuals or group</td>
<td><strong>Websites</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Websites</strong></td>
<td>• Learn how to build a website (no need to know HTML or CSS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dramatic personality or enjoy talking with the public</td>
<td>• Many visual sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many sources are text, few visuals available</td>
<td>• Audio sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do not want to write a research paper</td>
<td>• Video footage sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Want to try writing a script &amp; block out moves</td>
<td>• Interactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performances</strong></td>
<td>• Individuals or group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Best able to express ideas through writing</td>
<td><strong>Papers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Few visual sources available</td>
<td>• Individuals only</td>
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<td>• Individuals only</td>
<td></td>
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Required Paperwork
EVERY History Fair project must include the following elements:

PROCESS PAPER
Students state their thesis, summarize the main ideas of their project, and explain their process of creating their History Fair project.

You will also need a Title Page (or home page for websites).

Learn more about the Process Paper and Title Page here!

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY
• A bibliography contains citations—the detailed publication information—about every source you used.
• An annotation is your summary of the source and explanation of how it was used in your project.

Learn more about the annotated Bibliography here!
How will my project be evaluated?

Judges work together in teams to review your project and evaluate it on:

- Historical argument (and connection to the annual theme)
- Wide Research
- Primary Sources
- Historical Context
- Multiple Perspectives
- Historical Accuracy
- Significance in History
- Student Voice
- Presentation

See the official Evaluation Forms for each project category here! They have full explanations of each category listed above.
Visit our website for more information, ideas, resources, and examples: https://www.chicagohistory.org/education/historyfair/students/