

National History Day – California (NHD-CA)



2011-2012 Theme: Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History

Welcome to National History Day! During the 2011-2012 program year, students across the country will research topics related to a theme established by the National History Day organization. This year's theme is *Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History*. The theme intentionally is broad to allow you to select a local, state, national, or world history topic of interest to you and that fits with any school requirements you may have. You will live with your NHD project for a long time. Pick a topic that interests you!

Understanding the Theme

The first step in developing a NHD project is to understand the theme. You may want to begin by investigating the definitions of the key words in the theme. It's often worth it to find out the many ways each key word in the theme is defined. The *Longman Dictionary of American English* (2004) says that a **revolution** occurs when people use force or violence to change their ruler or political system. It can also mean "a complete change in ways of thinking, methods of working, etc." (p. 782). When many people think of "revolution," they think of wars. There have been many well known revolutions (e.g., China's Cultural Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, Cuban Revolution of 1959). Or, you may be interested in learning about revolutions in the fields of arts, music, sciences, medicine, technology, etc.

As you think about your topic, find out *what led up* to this particular revolution. Sometimes, an invention or innovation will lead to unintended, revolutionary consequences. For example, the cotton gin changed cotton production in ways no one could have expected in the South. Whether it is a war, a medical breakthrough, or an artistic style, find out *how* your topic was revolutionary – how were things dramatically and permanently changed because of it. "Unintended" revolutions are often especially interesting.

Longman explains that a **reaction** is something a person or group of people feels or does as a result of something that they experience or hear about. Often, there are many reactions to events. For example, in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi organized a march to protest the British Salt Tax in India. There were positive and negative reactions to the march. Here are a few of the reactions: People in towns along the march watered the roads to make them less dusty for Gandhi and his companions; people along the way joined the march; Gandhi was arrested; marchers were violently attacked by the police. As a history sleuth, you will want to learn about the different reactions related to your topic. *How long did reactions continue to occur? If reactions continued to occur for a long time, what does that mean about the significance of your topic?*

According to *Longman*, a **reform** is a significant improvement. Throughout history, there have been reformers, people who feel they need to make things better for themselves, others who seem to be suffering, and for society. Some famous American reformers include Jane Addams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Reforms associated with them include Hull House, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Legal decisions can be reforms. A 1947 Superior Court decision in the *Mendez v. Westminster* school segregation case made it illegal to send children to different schools because of their skin color or ethnicity. *You will want to learn about the people involved with the reform – both the people who supported it and those who were opposed to it.*

Connecting the Elements of the Theme

In many cases the three elements of this year's theme will work in connection with each other. Sometimes a *revolution* occurs as a strong *reaction* to particular situations or events and results in *reforms* intended to improve society. Other times, topics may align more with just one or two aspects of the theme. Reforms (changes) almost always spark reaction (opposition). These reactions sometimes reverse the reforms or

modify them. You will want to think about how the three possible elements of this year's theme fit together for your topic. You may even want to draw an image to remind yourself how the pieces fit. You will decide the best way to organize the elements of the theme to fit your topic.

Strong NHD projects show many connections between the elements of the annual theme. For example, the Truman Doctrine reflected U.S. fear that communism would overcome Europe and the "free world." It was a *reaction to fear* of the Soviet Union and *reformed* U.S. policy from one of friendship toward the Soviet Union (allies during WWII) to one of "containment" (i.e., minimizing the number of countries that become communist). *Numerous clashes (ongoing reactions)* between communist and non-communist countries during the Cold War are attributed at least in part to the Truman Doctrine.

If you plan to enter the NHD contest, we recommend that you try to address all three elements of the theme. They do not have to be addressed equally. If it does not make sense to address all three aspects of this year's theme with your particular topic, you should show that you did not simply forget or ignore a piece of the theme, but instead, as a result of your intensive research decided that the aspect not included clearly does not fit.

Choosing a Topic

After defining the elements of the theme, you will begin to consider possible topics. You probably will start big. Some *big* topic areas might include reforming social conditions for the poor, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, Libya's 1969 bloodless revolution, Mahatma Gandhi and India's revolt against British rule, the impact of the cotton gin on the South, apartheid in South Africa, etc. You may even notice something happening today that makes you wonder about the past. Just remember that *to be considered "history," a topic should have taken place 25 or more years ago*. You probably will conduct initial research in a big topic area to learn background information and find a more manageable topic.

Narrowing the Topic

NHD is not about enormous topics like the American Revolution. Instead, you want look for specific events, people, or groups within the larger topic. For example, you might explore the role of women in the French Revolution as described in the bread riots of 1789. Or, you might look at the Southern states' reaction to Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. A reformer such as Jane Addams might serve as an interesting subject. You might examine a failed rebellion such as the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848 along with its influence on efforts to create a separate Irish nation. *The big idea with regard to topics is to narrow down to a compelling event, individual, group, or moment that ultimately held great significance over time.*

Analyzing the Research

History Day projects emphasize lots of research (as much primary source research as possible). But, NHD projects are much more than just research reports. You are becoming an historian. This means that you will analyze the research. You will study your topic closely, pull apart information, and pay attention to how different sources explain it. You'll notice where different sources are not in agreement with each other. You will pay attention to details about your topic so you can put all the pieces together in a well organized, logical way when you create your project. As you learn more and more, you want to be able to answer some key questions such as: 1) What is my topic about? 2) Why is it important? 3) What is the larger issue that my topic connects to? 4) How did it happen? 5) Why did it happen? 6) How does it relate to the annual theme? You are not limited to these questions; however, they might help get you started.

Moving from Analysis to Creating Your Project – The Thesis Statement

You will be developing a project using an argumentative style. This means your project will be logically developed with lots of evidence to support your "argument" or position about the importance of your

topic. As you become an expert about your topic, you will write a thesis statement (your argument or position on the topic). Although the thesis statement will appear at the beginning of your project, you cannot write it until you know a great deal about your topic. Your thesis statement provides a response to *your* key questions.

A thesis statement is a kind of road map for your project. It will tell the viewer where you will be taking him or her. Many times, thesis statements make claims that others dispute. If there's nothing controversial in it, it probably is just a summary, not an argument. *Questions you may want to ask yourself as you analyze your research and develop your thesis statement include: 1) Did I answer my key questions? 2) Did I take a position or did I simply state facts? 3) Does my thesis statement show that my topic matters?* As you develop your project, you will visit your thesis frequently. You might end up changing it. Be sure your project's components and evidence are in line with your thesis.

Pulling the Pieces Together – The Historical Significance of Your Topic

The reason for all your analysis is to be able to explain why your topic is important in history. If you just told the story of your topic and explained how it connected to the annual theme, you would have developed a fancy summary or book report. As an historian, *you are expected to create your own conclusion(s) about the importance of your topic in history.* For example, France's revolutionaries looked to the American Revolution for inspiration in creating a republic in France. And, the French Revolution in turn inspired Haiti's successful uprising. A revolution in one place inspired and informed revolutions at other places and times. Successful NHD students often explain or show how even topics from very long ago affect us today.

Determining of the importance of your topic requires asking and finding answers to questions about time, place, cause and effect, change over time, impact, and significance. Some initial questions include:

- When and why did the events take place?
- What impact did those events have?
- What factors contributed/led up to a revolution?
- Why was there a need for reform at the particular time?
- Why did this event cause a reaction?
- How were things forever changed as a result of the revolution, reform, or reaction? And, why does it matter that things were forever changed?

Balancing Your Research

As an historian, you will be an active researcher using secondary and primary sources. You will seek out secondary sources to develop essential background knowledge, understand some of the differences in perspectives about the topic, and help narrow your topic. To the extent possible, you will seek out primary sources to get the "raw" story and first-hand accounts that bring the topic to life. As you conduct your research, you should continually craft new questions and look for contradictions and disagreements among sources.

As with each year's theme, the NHD theme for 2012 is intentionally broad. You'll become an expert on a topic that your teacher and NHD judges might not know a lot about, so be sure that they can easily see the connections between your topic and the theme. Now it's time to dig in!