

# Help! I Have A Topic, Now Which Project Category Do I Choose?

Bill Lickiss, National History Day

## For Students

*While research and historical analysis lie at the heart of any NHD project, presentation also plays a major part. Once a student has decided to participate in National History Day and identified a topic of interest, the next step is to figure out what type of project to pursue. This decision can be trickier than students might think. They should look at their own interests but also need to consider several other issues. In this essay, NHD alumnus Bill Lickiss discusses this decision in general terms and then shares information about his own experiences and choices from his five years as an NHD student participant.—EDITOR*

### General Discussion

**E**arly in the process of working on your National History Day (NHD) entry, you will have to select which category of project you want to do: an exhibit, a documentary, a paper, or a performance. For all categories except papers, you also will have to decide whether you want to work by yourself or as part of a group. You will want to base your choices on four main factors: your own preference, the nature of your topic, access to necessary resources, and your teacher's requirements and advice.

**Personal Preferences and Strengths.** First, consider your own interests and skills. Are you a good writer? If so, a paper might be a good choice. Do you love getting up and performing in front of people? Then a performance may be the way to go. Do you take photographs every chance you get; are you fascinated by computer technology; or do you enjoy creating videos using programs such as *iMovie*? A yes answer to one or more of these questions suggests doing a documentary. If museum or visual displays fascinate you, choose the exhibit category.

Similarly, evaluate your own strengths and weaknesses in deciding whether to do an individual project or be part of a group. Do you do your best work when you work alone? That might lead you to doing a paper or an individual project in another category. Conversely, if working together and exchanging ideas with other people stimulates your thinking and creativity, you might be better off doing a group entry.

Whatever you decide, be as realistic as you can. For example, if you love being around friends but realize that you accomplish and learn more when you work alone, maybe you will have a more successful NHD project if you do an individual project. Or if the people you would like to work with on a group project live too far away and transportation would cause difficulties, again, an individual project might be a better choice. Be aware of the logistics of your particular category and select a project category accordingly.

**Nature of Topic.** Next, make sure that your topic and the category fit well together. If your project is about art history, you will probably want to present your ideas visually; therefore, you would be better off participating in the exhibit or documentary category rather than writing a

paper. If your topic is related to ancient history where very few visual images will be available to you, a paper or performance will probably be a better choice. What if your personal preferences are at odds with the topic you are exploring? You might want to consider researching a different subject or modifying the topic so the category will match. If you really want to do that topic, however, you should probably pick a different category—it would be a shame to waste your research efforts in a category that doesn't allow you to showcase what you have discovered!

**Available Resources.** You also need to think about whether you have or will be able to get the necessary *resources* for the particular project category. Resources include materials (such as photographs, costumes, or video clips), equipment (like computers, tape recorders, or cameras), and the skills and technical knowledge to use the equipment or design and construct whatever you need for the particular type of project. If your access to materials and equipment is limited, a paper might be the best choice; however, you should also consider the possibility of doing a performance if those resources are scarce. An effective, successful performance does not have to be fancy or complicated with a big set or many props, as long as you focus on researching your topic thoroughly, writing a strong script, and then polishing your delivery.

For the other two categories, you will probably need some additional materials and

### The Exhibit Category



- Do I like going to museums and looking at how displays are put together? Have I wanted to tell someone at a museum that they could change a few things to make their displays a little better?
  - Do I have access to the materials and tools needed to make an exhibit that will be at most 6' tall, 40" wide and 30" deep? Do I have the skills to build the exhibit?
  - Can I find visuals to illustrate my topic, such as maps, timelines, and photographs?
  - Can I artistically arrange words and pictures in an exhibit?
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- Are there people I can interview who will give me quotes to place on the board? Will I be able to find more quotes in other primary or secondary sources?
  - Is creating an exhibit the best way to show off my topic? Why or why not?

## The Documentary Category

- Am I interested in using computers, cameras, and various other technologies?
- Can I conduct **and record** interviews (for the purpose of including clips in the documentary) for my topic?
- Can I find video clips to use in my documentary?
- Are there enough still photographs related to my topic that I can use in my documentary? (While there is no set number of photographs, remember that you want to fill the entire ten minutes with material!)
- Do I have access to equipment that will be needed to make a documentary (such as computers with video editing programs, cameras, scanners, and recording devices)?
- Is creating a documentary the best way to show off my topic? Why or why not?



technical skills. For example, do you have or can you get the materials and tools you will need to build an exhibit? For a documentary, do you have access to computers, video programs, and/or cameras? Do you already know how to use the tools and equipment, or do you have enough time to learn how to use them? Without access to the right kinds of resources, despite your best efforts, exhibits and documentaries can be extremely frustrating.

**Teacher's Advice.** Lastly, you should consider your teacher's interests, preferences, or strengths. You need to ask yourself several questions. What categories does your teacher suggest, and why? If you want to do a project in a different category, will your teacher be able to help you, or do you know another teacher or adult who can act as your mentor in the technical aspects of the project? Will your teacher support your efforts to do a type of project outside his or her area of expertise? Is your teacher willing to work with you on the research and then assist you in finding someone else to help you with other tasks? Remember, though, that your teacher probably has good reasons for steering you in the direction of one category over another, and in the end, you and your teacher must agree on the category you have selected.

You will need to balance all of these issues as you decide what type of NHD project to do. For example, if the topic and project type do not go together, you might want to select a different type of project; alternatively, you could modify the topic so that it better matches your preferred category. If the idea of writing a script for a performance intrigues you, but you realize you do not have enough time to write a script, memorize it, **and** rehearse the performance, use your writing skills for a paper this year—and plan to do a performance next year. If you want to create a documentary but your teacher is urging students to do papers, you could compromise by working on an exhibit that would still let you present your ideas visually but would not require the same level of technical expertise as a documentary. Eventually, you want to select the category that will give you the most positive, successful NHD experience.

## The Paper Category

- Do I like to write/want to write a paper?
- Can I present my information effectively without using many graphics or visual images?
- Is writing a paper the best way to show off my topic and research? Why or why not?



## My Experiences

Personal experience taught me how important it is to think carefully about these issues. The first year I participated in NHD, I did what I wanted without really thinking about how my decision would carry through to the final product. I considered only my own skills, abilities, interests, and preferences. It was not until my second year that I began to realize I also needed to consider my teacher's suggestions, and to look at the relationship between the topic and type of project I wanted to do.

**My First NHD Project.** My eighth grade social studies teacher, Ms. Grantham, required us to do a research project. Little did I realize at the time that this was her way of introducing us to NHD. The theme that year (1992) was *Communication in History: The Key to Understanding*. Ms. Grantham provided the class with a list of "Suggested Topics," and from that list, I picked Johannes Gutenberg and his invention of the printing press.

I found lots of information about Gutenberg and his invention, and it was quite easy to connect my topic to the theme of *Communication in History*. I learned that the printing press revolutionized the way people communicated. Before the printing press, books were rare and quite expensive, since each copy of a book, pamphlet, or other written document had to be produced one at a time and entirely by hand. Once the printing press was created, people could make multiple copies of documents at once. Information traveled faster and farther than ever before, and people gained increased access to the printed word. The secondary sources I looked at informed me that the printing press's greatest historical impact was in spreading Christianity; the first book that Gutenberg printed was the *Bible*.

Since Gutenberg lived in the 15th century and invented the printing press in 1436, centuries before there was such a thing as photography, my biggest difficulty was to find primary sources, especially pictures and visual images that I might use in a project. My teacher urged me to do a paper or performance, but I chose not to follow her advice. I knew that I enjoyed using and learning about technology, and I liked to work by myself so I decided to enter the category that was then called Individual "Media" (now the "Documentary" category). My project used relatively simple technology, based on slides. I only found eight images, and made a slide of each. With only eight slides, my video was very short: I used only six of the available ten minutes. In retrospect, it is not surprising that my entry did not go beyond the school level.

The downfall to my entry was not the topic or lack of research; rather, it was the category I chose. Looking back, I now realize that I would have been better off if I had picked any of the other categories. If I had written a paper, I could have quoted from Gutenberg's publications and discussed the impact his invention had on communication. Alternatively, I might have done a performance portraying Gutenberg and a modern day publisher. Those eight images, when combined with quotes from Gutenberg's writings, could also have made a more effective exhibit than the slide show I produced. While it is important to choose both a topic and a category that you like, it is also critical to choose a category that goes well with your topic.

The next year, I started high school. I learned that my school did not offer NHD as part of its curriculum, but I knew I wanted to participate again. I went back to Ms. Grantham, and she continued to act as my NHD mentor for the next four years. Each year, for many of the same reasons I chose the "Media" category in eighth grade, I did an Individual Media entry. My ninth grade NHD experience was slightly more successful, and I made it to the county (what most states call "district") contest. In tenth through twelfth grades, I made it to the state contest each year, and twice I went on to the national contest.

**My Final NHD Project.** The last time I participated as a student in NHD was my senior year of high school. The theme that year (1996) was *Taking a Stand in History: Individuals,*

### The Performance Category

- Do I like to show off for my friends, or am I part of my school's drama club?
- Are there enough primary and secondary sources for me to create an effective and original ten-minute long script?
- Do I have the creative writing skills to produce an original script?
- Will I be able to create or find costumes that are authentic to my topic, and will I be able to create an effective set and find appropriate props that will make my performance come alive? (Remember, costumes do not need to be elaborate, and sets and props do not need to be large or complicated. Simplicity in performances can often be quite effective.)
- Is creating a performance the best way to show off my topic? Why or why not?



*Groups, Movements.* After brainstorming for topics with my teacher and family, I decided to focus my final project on the U.S. Congressional Committee called the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). HUAC was originally formed during the 1920s to combat perceived Communist infiltration in the United States. At first, HUAC did not receive much publicity, but that changed dramatically in the mid-1940s when the committee focused its attention on possible Communist infiltration of Hollywood and the movie industry. HUAC convinced many Americans that screenwriters, producers, and actors in Hollywood were promoting Communist ideas in their movies. Newspapers gave a great deal of coverage to the story, and Congress soon made HUAC a permanent Committee with guaranteed funding.

As I started to read about HUAC, I discovered Dalton Trumbo (who became the main focus for my NHD project) and the other members of what came to be known as “the Hollywood Ten,” a group of ten men from Hollywood who were called to testify before the committee. HUAC became infamous for asking witnesses, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” Each member of the Hollywood Ten took a stand by refusing to answer the committee’s question; as a result, each was *blacklisted* so that he could no longer find work in Hollywood, and each man was sentenced to jail.

As I continued researching, I realized that this topic could easily fit into any of the four NHD categories. A paper could have quoted from the 1940s *Congressional Record* or from writings by or interviews with the members of the Hollywood Ten. An exhibit might have used various newspaper clippings and photographs, both of which were plentiful. In a performance, I might have portrayed one or more of the individuals in the group, or I could have taken on the role of a member of HUAC. But because I could locate ample video clips and photographs and still enjoyed working alone and with video, I decided for the fifth time to enter the Individual Media category.

Each category offers wonderful opportunities to demonstrate what you have learned, the extensive research you have conducted, and your own individual talents. The key here is to select the category which will let you and your work shine most brightly! I learned this lesson, and in my senior year, thorough research combined with my careful efforts to match my topic to the category paid off handsomely: my documentary placed fifth in the nation in the Senior Individual Media category that year.

*Bill Lickiss’ National History Day involvement started fourteen years ago. He participated as a student in NHD for five years, from 8th through 12th grades. After earning a degree in education, he taught middle school social studies in California for several years and introduced his students to NHD. Bill currently works as the Contest and Program Manager for NHD.*