

SUCCESSFUL HISTORY DAY PROJECTS*

There is a difference between successful and award winning history day projects. A successful project is one where you pick a topic you really like, get really interested in it, interpret it in depth, and create a project of which you feel proud. A great project is one in which you answer the call, cross the threshold, face the tests and return transformed. So, let's not go overboard on the competition aspect of the project.

On the other hand, there is a National History Day competition, and you might be thinking about how to make your project as competitive as possible. Here are some qualities that we've noticed in regards to the winning projects from our school:

1. **Hard Work:** Successful projects are born from hard work. You work on it everyday. You sacrifice Friday and Saturday nights. You sacrifice watching the game, trips to the mall, and hanging out with friends. Not every time but often.
2. **Awesome Research:**
 - a. You do an insane amount of research. (See #1) You just keep reading about your topic and searching for new sources to answers questions you have about your topic.
 - b. You research a great many primary sources. You have a **huge advantage if you find an archive of primary sources on your topic**, so pick a topic with that in mind.
 1. For a project on Stetson Kennedy, the students went to a special library in New York City for a three-day weekend, poring through primary sources on the man. In the process, they discovered important evidence regarding the accuracy of Kennedy's autobiography.
 2. The students who did the national championship winning performance on the Seneca Fall Convention took a three-day weekend trip to Seneca Falls where they got access to a protected archive of primary documents including handwritten letters by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and others.
 - c. You find sources that no one else has found before.
 1. The national silver medal project on the Yalta Conference dazzled professional historians because the students went to the National Archives in Washington D.C. and accessed recently declassified footage of the conference.
3. **Insightful Analysis of Historical Context:** You locate the topic in HISTORICAL CONTEXT showing why something happened the way it did WHEN it did. You clearly connect how surrounding events influenced your topic.
4. **Major Significance:** You show why the topic is IMPORTANT in history. There are 3 dimensions to historical significance: time, depth and breadth. First, how did a topic affect both the short and long term? You clearly show how the topic shaped the world today. Second, how profoundly did a topic affect things? How were different aspects of life affected (PEGS)? Third, how far-reaching (local, state, national, global) were the effects of a topic? A truly amazing project hits all the dimensions.
5. **Thorough Integration of Theme:** Your project has to more than simply connect to the theme. Rather, the theme is integral to the project. Your thesis is about the theme. Your argument is structured around the theme and you use theme words throughout. What are the Rights? What are the Responsibilities?
6. **Sophisticated reasoning/critical thinking:** You analyze and synthesize throughout demonstrating high-level critical thinking. You PROPP your evidence. Your C→E arguments show complex causation and have clear connections. Your C arguments have insightful issues and detailed descriptors. Your G arguments have large and representative samples. You elegantly balance complexity and clarity.
7. **Luck.** There is no question that the level of competition in your category and the arbitrariness of judging affects how you do. A lot of the competition is out of your control. Our students win because their projects are so good. They lose because they are unlucky!

* Adapted from "Successful History Day Projects" by Kevin O'Reilly of Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School