

The 2014 History Day theme, “Rights and Responsibilities in History,” is a relationship of obligations: what is owed to people, and what people feel they owe. The nuances of these two ideas provide great opportunities for students’ historical study, but also great challenges.

Since this theme is about relationships, students should select topics that deal with rights and responsibilities. But addressing both is not required, and students do not need necessarily need to give them equal weight. It is the relationship between both rights and responsibilities, and how they work together, that will shape students’ topics. The details of the relationship might not be immediately clear, but initial research should help them to articulate this idea early on in the History Day process. Key questions to consider might be:

- How did the acquisition of a right result from responsibilities?
- How did responsibilities affect the giving or taking of rights?
- How can responsibilities come into conflict with rights?
- What happens when rights or responsibilities are ignored or denied?

Before choosing a topic, students need to have a clear understanding of the definition of the theme words, as well as the difference between a right and a privilege. Students should not settle upon a topic unless they can argue, even early on, that there is a connection to the annual theme. Many students will gravitate towards rights as an initial topic focus. From there, students must determine how rights played a role in that topic. Acquisition of rights or denial of rights are often the result of people’s understanding of personal, community, or moral responsibility.

Additionally, the rights and responsibilities addressed need to have a traceable path. A legitimate right owed to someone generally has a traceable source – such as the Bill of Rights or a Supreme Court decision. Responsibility can also have its origins in documents, such as a code of conduct or an organizational charter. Sometimes, however, responsibility comes from a sense of moral obligation. In this case, stating that someone “felt responsible” should be followed with historical evidence demonstrating this feeling based on words or actions.

The sensitive nature of rights and responsibilities opens the door for topic pitfalls, in particular a tendency to preach, or a failure to draw conclusions. Furthermore, the words “in history” imply that the topic is addressed with an historical eye: no soapboxes allowed. Ideas about what “should” have happened make for poor historical arguments. Conclusions on the topic’s significance need to flow from historical evidence, not from 21<sup>st</sup>-century beliefs.

For example, Abraham Lincoln and many of the 1865 Republican Congressmen felt a responsibility to guarantee the right of freedom to black Americans, and that sense of responsibility resulted in the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment. Students addressing this topic could look for evidence in Lincoln’s papers, Congressional documents, and the personal letters of Congressmen. But it’s important to steer clear of stating that Lincoln “should” have fought for abolition earlier or that African Americans never “should” have been enslaved. Such conclusions stray too far from the evidence and too far into philosophical rather than historical arguments.

“Rights and Responsibilities in History” is a theme that will allow students to explore obligations, for the people and of the people, and how those obligations have impacted the way humans interact with each other and their environments. As a bonus, the analysis of this theme will teach the historical skill of objectivity as they learn to step away from their modern-day understanding of rights and responsibilities and instead draw conclusions based on evidence from the historical period.