

National History Day Theme 2013:

Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events

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National History Day in Minnesota



The 2013 National History Day theme, “Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events,” is an old favorite; it has a great capacity for topic variety, and it encourages analysis from the outset.

Students’ challenge with this theme is to argue that an historical person, idea or event is actually a turning point, so from the beginning, students need to think about their topic’s role in changing a historical direction.

Proving change is not enough for “Turning Points.” To be a turning point, a topic must show decisive change of direction, a departure from long-held tradition or rule, a critical pivot, or a moment of upheaval. Many historical events create change, but a turning point is sharper: a point when history effectively turns a corner.

For most History Day projects this year, the “heart” of the story will be the turning point itself. Context and impact will be crucial in explaining why the topic is actually a turning point: what was happening before that led to pivotal change, and what was the significance of that change? As students choose their topics, then, they will need to consider context and impact from the start to ensure that their topic clearly fits the theme.

In choosing a topic, students can choose a general area that interests them and try to pinpoint a moment when history turned a corner. Or, they can choose a specific person, event or idea and immediately dig into the context and impact to determine if that topic is a turning point. Whatever a student chooses, the topic should include at least one of the tag words: People, Ideas or Events. Most topics will address two or more.

As students are beginning research and making topic choices, here are some questions to consider: Did the course of history make a radical, unexpected or profound change? Was this a moment when tradition, law, belief or institution took a sharp turn? Is this a point that historians would argue caused an event to change direction?

In the end, this is a theme that pushes students to consider that history is not inevitable. Events and ideas that to us, comfortably in the 21st century, seem destined to happen, may have seemed outrageous or impossible at the time. But the benefit of hindsight allows students to examine those outrageous moments, analyze the events before and after, and argue that these pivotal changes led to unexpected, powerful, long-standing or critical impacts that pushed history in a new direction.

Topic Idea: Slavery

Slavery, like many big topics, has several turning points in its timeline. Within the 250-year history of the institution of U.S. slavery, students can consider when slavery became attached to skin color, when slave revolts inspired fear and harsher laws, and when slavery began to end. Each of these moments in history marked a pivotal change in the nature of slavery: Virginia’s first law linking the slave status of mother to child, the Haitian Revolution, and the election of 1860.

Topic Idea: World War II

Something as large as a war can have a variety of turning points, in the form of battles, politics, and technological change. A battle turning point could be the Battle of Midway, or even the bombing of Pearl Harbor as it relates to American involvement. Kristallnacht, in November 1938, marked the first time that Nazis destroyed Jewish property incarcerated Jews on the basis of ethnicity. The development and use of the atomic bomb was a remarkable turning point in warfare.

Topic Idea: Sports

Jackie Robinson is not the only turning point in sports history. Consider moments where the games made radical changes that changed the culture of the sport. The Black Sox Scandal resulted in new MLB leadership and gambling laws that remain to this day. The massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics transformed not only the security of the Games, but also the stage of global terrorism.