

Building Historical Context and Conducting Research

I have my topic, and I know how it is connected to the NHD theme. What do I do next?

Build historical context by reading different types of sources.

Nothing in history happens in a vacuum. To understand the connections between your topic and the time period, begin reading about the time period and as you read ask yourself questions: why did my topic happen at this particular time and in this particular place? What were the events or the influences that came before my topic? How was my topic influenced by and how did it influence the economic, social, political, and cultural climate of the time period? All of these questions will help you to build the story of your topic and grasp the historical significance.

While you are researching a topic for an NHD project, you will read different types of sources: primary sources, secondary sources, and tertiary sources.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a piece of information about a historical event or period in which the creator of the source was an actual participant in or a contemporary of a historical moment. The purpose of primary sources is to capture the words, the thoughts, and the intentions of the past. Primary sources help you to interpret what happened and why it happened.

Examples of primary sources include documents, artifacts, historic sites, songs, or other written and tangible items created during the historical period you are studying.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a source that was not created first-hand by someone who participated in the historical era. Secondary sources are usually created by historians, but based on the historian's reading of primary sources. Secondary sources are usually written decades, if not centuries, after the event occurred by people who did not live through or participate in the event or issue. The purpose of a secondary source is to help build the story of your research from multiple perspectives and to give your research historical context.

An example of a secondary source is *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* by James M. McPherson, published in 1988. They are a great starting point in helping you see the big picture. Understanding the context of your topic will help you make sense of the primary sources that you find.

The primary and secondary sources McPherson used are listed in the bibliography. Another researcher might consult these same primary sources and reach a different conclusion.

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources are based on a collection of primary and secondary sources and may or may not be written by an expert. Tertiary sources should never appear in your bibliography but are only used as exploratory sources, to give you ideas about what to research. Wikipedia is not a reliable source and should not be utilized or appear in your bibliography.

Examples of tertiary sources are dictionaries, encyclopedias, fact books, and guidebooks.

Citations/Bibliographies

To record the information the two acceptable styles of writing for NHD projects are Turabian and MLA. Historians use Turabian, but we know that many classes in middle school and high school teach the MLA style. It does not matter which of these two styles you use, but it is important to be consistent. For help with questions of citations, you can check out Turabian or MLA guides from your local library.

Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is required for all categories. The annotations for each source must explain how the source was used and how it helped you understand your topic. You should also use the annotation to explain why you categorized a particular source as primary or secondary. Sources of visual materials and oral interviews, if used, must also be included.

List only those sources that you used to develop your entry. An annotation normally should be only 1–3 sentences long.

- **Source** (example):
Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*. 1st ed. New York: David McKay Co. Inc., 1962.
- **Annotation** (example):
Daisy Bates was the president of the Arkansas NAACP and the one who met and listened to the students each day. This first-hand account was very important to my paper because it made me more aware of the feelings of the people involved.