National History Day Documentaries

What is a Documentary?

A History Day documentary reflects your ability to use audiovisual equipment to communicate your topic's significance. Through a documentary you will be able to incorporate still images, moving images, narration, and other types of media into a 10-minute original production.

The Basic Framework

- **Time Limit**: Documentaries may not exceed 10 minutes in length. Timing will begin when the first visual image of the presentation appears and/or the first sound is heard. Color bars and other visual leads in a video will be counted in the time limit. Timing will end when the last visual image or sound of the presentation concludes (this includes credits).
- **Student Produced**: A History Day documentary must be produced only by the student or students who are listed as the creators of the entry. This means that only the students can work with the technology to create the documentary, record or film interviews, etc.
- **Credits**: You must also include credits at the end of the documentary and these credits will count towards the time limit.
- **Self Run**: A History Day documentary must also be self-run, which means that there is no live narration or commentary during the documentary. You should be able to hit "play" and walk away.
- **Process Paper and Annotated Bibliography**: You will submit these documents that answer questions about the process of creating your documentary and provide information about your research process.
- **Be sure to check the NHD Contest Rulebook for complete category rules!**

Why Should I Choose the Documentary Category?

A documentary can be an excellent way to communicate the research and analysis of your topic. You need to, however, make a careful decision in selecting the documentary category.

- **You need to be a good fit for the category**. You should be interested in working with computers and documentary technology. You should have access to a computer with documentary or computer-based slideshow software (such as PowerPoint or Keynote) either at home or at school. Do you know how to use this software or are you willing to learn? You should also think about where you will have to do most of the work on your documentary. If you are working in a group, how will you arrange transportation to group members' homes?
- **Your topic needs to be a good fit for the category**. You also need to think about if your topic will lend itself well to the documentary category. A great deal of visual materials are required to fill ten minutes in a documentary. What photographs, illustrations, film footage, etc. will you be able to find about your topic?

Types of History Day Documentaries

There are two basic types for documentaries that will satisfy the requirements for a History Day documentary.

- **Video-Edited Documentaries**: Most History Day students use video-editing software to create a 10-minute documentary, much like professional documentary that you might see on PBS or the History Channel. Video editing programs often come standard on computers (Apple's iMovie or Windows' MovieMaker 10) but there are also many other choices for software. The advantage this approach offers is that you are able to more easily combine visual and audio elements in your presentation.
- **Computer-Based Slideshow Documentaries**: Although the popularity of this type of documentary has waned as new technology has been developed, a computer-based slideshow (such as a PowerPoint presentation) is still an acceptable way to create an NHD documentary. Students creating this type of documentary may be tempted to display their script as written text on slides, however, this is not the most effective form of presentation as viewers will want to hear the narration, not read it. Students can include audio narration through PowerPoint or synchronize an audio recording to be played simultaneously with the slideshow.

Documentary Organization

Similar to any other History Day project, your documentary should **make an argument** about your topic. In order to make a clear argument, you need to have a good organizational structure to your documentary.

- **Opening/Introduction**: As the documentary begins and you introduce the subject to your viewers, make sure that you are also making your argument clear. You want to let your viewers know what you will prove with your documentary.
- **Body**: Make your documentary more than just one fact after another. Dividing your documentary into sections that will help support and prove the argument you have laid out in the opening. Sections will make it easier for you to create your documentary and easier for your viewers to follow along.
- **Closing/Conclusion**: While squeezing everything you want to say into just 10 minutes can be difficult, it's important to make time at the end of your documentary to reiterate your conclusions and argument for your viewer.
- **Credits**: Remember that one of the History Day rules is that you include credits at the end of your documentary.

> **What should I include in my credits?**
> According to National History Day, "your credits include every source that appears in your documentary, but not every source you consulted." This means that you don't need to include your entire bibliography in the credits, but it should include a list of the general places you went for information, including: people who worked on the documentary, interviewees who appeared in the documentary, archives or institutions used to find information, music credits, filming locations, and any special thanks you would like to include. If you need a sample, check out a professional documentary to see what they include and how they format their credits.

Documentary Elements

- **Script**: The script is one of the most important elements in your documentary. The script contains your thesis, support for your argument, and demonstrates your research. You should put a significant amount of time into writing a solid script. Your script can include quotes from your research that help to support your argument. You can incorporate the words of those you may have interviewed for your research. In the end, you will record your script to create the narration for your documentary.
- **Visual Images**: The visual images are critical in a good documentary as they provide the visual support for your script. It's important to build a large image collection as you are doing your research, instead of waiting until you are putting the documentary together. You can find images online for your documentary, but you can also building your image collection by scanning or taking digital images of photographs in books. Take care to make sure that you images are at a high enough resolution to not appear pixelated on screen.
- **Music or Sound Effects**: An effective soundtrack can make for a moving and effective presentation. What music or effects would enhance your documentary? Make sure that the music is not too loud or the effects too abrupt to distract from your narration, which is the most important part of your documentary.

Equipment and Technology

Creating a documentary requires access to software and/or video editing and production equipment. This doesn't mean having to purchase pricey software programs! Apple's iMovie and Windows' MovieMaker are standard applications on the newest versions of each operating system. Talk with your parents and teacher about what resources are available at home or school and where you will plan to do the majority of your work. (This is especially important if you do not use the same program at home and school or have different programs at group members' homes.)

If you are planning on shooting your own footage or interviews, you may also need access to a video camera or recording equipment. Again, talk to your parents or teachers about what you can borrow from school, friends, or family. If equipment isn't available at your school, remember to check and see what might be available at other schools in your district.

Frequently Asked Documentary Questions

Who can operate the camera or recording equipment to create the documentary?
All entries must be student-produced, which means that group members (or the individual student) must operate all equipment. If you are creating a documentary as an individual and want to appear on camera, you will need to set the camera up on a tripod and film yourself in the scene.

Who can appear in the documentary?
Since entries must be student-produced, this means that group members (or the individual student) must be the only ones that appear on camera as a narrator or in any dramatization that you may film. Please note that this does not include interviews that you do of participants in a historical event or experts.

Can someone else read quotes or narrate the documentary for me?
No, only group members (or the individual student) may provide the narration and voice-over for the documentary. Students can use pre-existing narration or sound clips, but cannot have something created by others specifically for use in your entry.

What format should the documentary be in?
Students will need to plan to upload a shareable .MP4 video file of their final project to Google Drive, One Drive or Dropbox by the contest registration deadline. Plan to do this early in case of slow internet upload speeds or technical difficulties.

Putting the Documentary Together

Organization and planning are important keys to success in the documentary category. Once you've completed your research, outline the main points of your argument and the sections you will need in your documentary, much like if you were writing a paper. From there, you will be able to write a script and develop a storyboard of images to include in your documentary. It is important to plan all of this out on paper before you even begin working with the computer program!

The **Video Storyboard** form on the following page offers you a simple template to plan out your documentary. Once you have your script written, you will want to select visuals to help explain, demonstrate, and support your argument. You may also want to keep track of the duration of each video clip or narration segment.

Documentary Storyboard

Notes/Time	Visual	Audio

Tips for Creating a Spectacular NHD Documentary

Watch other Documentaries

One of the best ways to understand the qualities of a good documentary is to watch other documentaries, both professional and those produced for NHD. What are the effective features of the documentary? How do they convey their argument? Are there any techniques you think you should avoid? You can find many old NHD documentaries by looking on NHD.org or searching on YouTube.

Develop Your Argument

No matter if you are working alone or in a group or in the junior or senior division, it is important to make sure that your argument (thesis) is clear **in the project** itself. Your argument should be your analysis of why your topic is significant in history. It is what transforms your documentary from just a story to an argument. It is the lens that brings everything else in your documentary into focus.

Plan It Out

Using your thesis as a guide, outline your argument and write your script. You can then use a storyboard to plan out what visuals you can use to support your narration. Planning this all out on paper before you even begin using the program will save you frustration later on.

Use Your Research

Your research is there for more than just embellishing your bibliography. Figure out ways to include your research as support in your documentary. Are there quotes that you can include in your script? Newspapers or photographs that you can use for visuals? Not only will this help to prove your argument but it will also make your documentary more interesting to your viewers.

Content is More Important than Glitz

Fancy transitions, graphics and effects can make for a flashy documentary and can be fun to create, but remember that the history is the most important part of your documentary.

The Documentary Stands Alone

When evaluating NHD documentaries, judges should be able to find all the information about your topic in the documentary itself. The documentary has to stand on its own. This means that your argument, support and theme connection need to be apparent within the documentary and not depend on your explanation in the interview. Ask someone who has never seen your documentary to watch it (a friend, teacher, neighbor, etc). Without saying anything, have them watch the documentary and then ask them a few questions to see if you have communicated your argument clearly: What am I trying to prove in my documentary? What evidence have I shown to support that argument? What do you like about my documentary? What is confusing to you?

Fair Use and Copyright

Making History: How to Create a Historical Documentary, a booklet produced by National History Day, offers a good summary of this issue for History Day students. "Because you are creating an *educational* documentary for the NHD competition and are following NHD's contest rules, your entry should fall within "fair use" copyright laws. But this means that"

- Your documentary can only be shown within NHD competitions.
- You must have proper *credits* within the film.
- You must list and credit *all* of your sources in your annotated bibliography.
- You cannot take and use verbatim the narration of another [professionally produced] documentary.

If you have questions regarding copyright issues, you should contact the NHD office or an attorney directly. In preparing your entry for NHD, you, your teacher, and your parents or guardians should be mindful of copyright issues. A helpful source to consults with respect to these issues is The Copyright Kids webpage, operated by The Copyright Society of the U.S.A. This page can be found at http://www.copyrightkids.org/."

Preparing for Competition with a Documentary

Submitting Your Documentary

Documentary students will also need to save their paperwork as one PDF file and upload it to the registration system by the deadline. This PDF file will contain the title page, process paper and annotated bibliography in that order.

Important contest planning note! Make sure that the documentary stays on the shareable drive and does not change locations or settings during the contest. The runs from the close of registration through the announcement of finalists.

Be sure to read the complete general and category-specific rules before starting your documentary, available online at www.nhd.org

What are the Qualities of a Good Documentary?

The qualities that a judge is looking for in your NHD documentary are written right on the evaluation sheet. Listed below are the same criteria judges will use to evaluate your project. After you create your documentary, go through this list and ask yourself if you've met the criteria or incorporated this information into your project.

Historical Quality – 80% (At 80%, the historical quality of your documentary is by far the most important part!)

- ☐ **My documentary is historically accurate:** All the information in my documentary is true to the best of my knowledge.
- ☐ **I show analysis and interpretation:** My documentary doesn't just recount facts or tell a story. I interpret and analyze my topic. My documentary has a strong central thesis or argument that I prove. I can point to where I state my thesis on my script.
- ☐ **I place my topic in historical context:** My topic didn't take place in isolation. I made sure to place my topic into historical context – the intellectual, physical, social, and cultural setting for my topic.
- ☐ **My project shows wide, balanced research and I used available primary sources:** These ideas all relate to the research behind your NHD documentary. Judges will look carefully at your bibliography to learn more about your research process. They want to see that you investigated multiple perspectives about your topic and to see that you looked at all sides of an issue. They are looking for research using both primary and secondary sources and to see that you used a variety of source types.
- ☐ **I clearly relate my topic to the theme:** My theme connection is clear in my documentary itself.
- ☐ **I demonstrate the significance of my topic in history and draw conclusions:** My documentary does more than just describe my topic. I explain why my topic is important in history or demonstrate its significance.
- ☐ **My project clearly shows my voice:** Judges will look to see that the ideas, analysis, argument, and conclusions in your project are original and persuasive.

Clarity of Presentation – 20%

- ☐ **My documentary presents audio and visuals that enhance the topic:** I have a documentary with audio that is clear, an even volume and easy to understand. The visuals are easy to see, clearly focused and easy to read.
- ☐ **My documentary narration and written materials are free from grammatical or mechanical errors:** I have an organized, well written and articulately narrated documentary. I was careful to avoid plagiarism and I have double checked spelling and grammar in my process paper and bibliography.