National History Day Exhibits

What is an exhibit?

An exhibit is a visual representation of your research and interpretation of your topic's significance in history. Your exhibit will look a lot like a small version of an exhibit you might see in a museum. You may have already made something similar to an exhibit if you have ever created a poster for a class project.

Creating an exhibit gives you the opportunity to use a variety of visual materials to make your argument. In addition to text, you can use things like timelines, maps, graphs, charts, photographs, paintings, media devices, or artifacts. You can also incorporate primary sources into your exhibit – including quotations, letters, newspaper articles, and more. Using these visual elements will help you create a rich and informative exhibit.

The Basic Framework

- **Size Limit**: the overall size of your exhibit when displayed can be up to 40 inches wide, 30 inches deep and 6 feet high.
- **Word Limit**: There is a 500 word limit to all text that you create that appears on or as part of your exhibit. All the text that *you write* counts toward the 500 word limit. If you didn't write it, it doesn't count towards the limit. This means that you can use quotations from other sources and it won't count towards your limit.

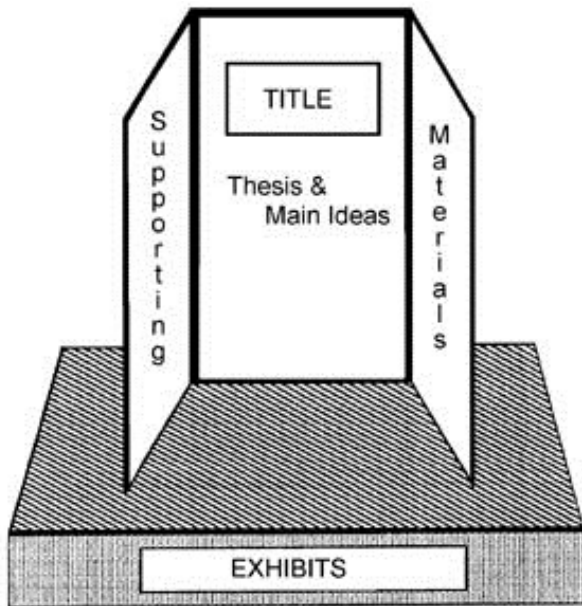| Examples of things that count…	Examples of things that don't count…
- Titles and subtitles - Captions - Graphs, charts, or timelines that you create yourself - Text that you write that is on your exhibit, is included in a scrapbook, or narration in a media device	- Quotations - Graphs, charts, or timelines that you don't create yourself - Brief citations crediting the source of an illustration or quotations

- Dates count as one word. For example, "December 2, 1935" would all count as one word.

- **Media**: Media devices (such as tape recorders, projectors, computers, tablets, or video monitors) can be used in your exhibit. They must not run for more than a total of 2 minutes and they must not loop. The viewer must be able to control the media device. Remember, media devices must fit inside the size limit, and if you write narration for your media clip it will count towards your 500 word-limit.
- **Links:** There cannot be any links, like QR codes, linking to external content.
- **Be sure to check the *NHD Contest Rulebook* for complete category rules!**

Why Should I Choose the Exhibit Category?

The exhibit category is great for people who enjoy working with their hands and physically building an argument. If you've ever gone to a museum and wondered how they put an exhibit together and thought you might want to give it a try—now is your chance. You should make sure that you have access to exhibit building supplies, including exhibit or poster board, construction paper, a printer, scissors, adhesives, etc. While many topics can be effectively conveyed using the exhibit category, this category is especially suitable for topics that have a variety of visual materials that can be used to support the argument, including photographs, illustrations, maps, graphs, newspaper articles, letters, etc.

Exhibit Shapes and Sizes

Exhibits are designed to display visual and written information on a topic in an easy-to-understand and attractive manner. Exhibits are not simply collections of material. They are carefully designed to make an argument about your topic. To be successful, an exhibit must create an effective balance between visual interest and historical explanation.
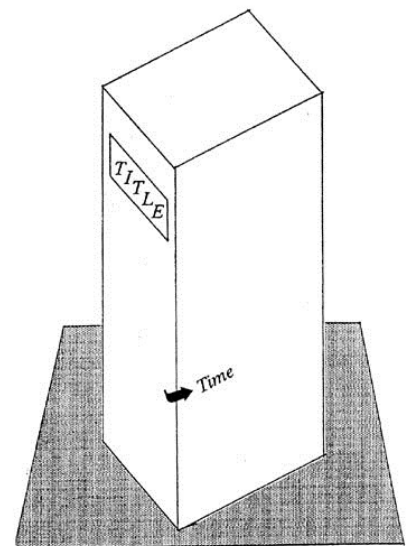
Three-Panel Display

The most common form of an exhibit is a three-panel display, similar to the one on the left. This style is the least complicated to design and build, and is a very effective way to present your information. Here are some tips for this style:

- Be sure your title is the main focus of the center panel.
- Use the center panel to present your main ideas and argument.
- Use the side panels to provide supporting evidence for your argument.
- Divide the exhibit into sections to give it an organizational structure that makes sense to the viewer.
- If your topic is presented chronologically, make sure the sequence works visually on the panels.
- You have a limited number of words; use them sparingly and let the quotations, documents, artifacts, drawings, and photographs demonstrate your thesis.
- Artifacts or other materials may also be placed on the table between the side panels, but remember that it should be directly related to the topic and necessary to support your argument.

Three-Dimensional Exhibit

A three-dimensional exhibit is more complicated to construct, but can be especially effective for explaining topics where change over time is important. Like the three-panel display, one side should contain your title and main theme. As you move around the exhibit, the development of your topic can be explored. It is not necessary for the project itself to be able to spin. You may set it on a table (or the floor) so people can walk around it.

When making a three-dimensional exhibit, good organization is especially important. Because your exhibit has so many sides, viewers may be more easily confused about how to follow your exhibit's narrative. Make sure that each side is clearly labeled, cleanly organized, and that there is a logical flow of ideas as the viewer moves about your exhibit.

This is just a start to the creative ways that History Day students have expressed their arguments in the exhibit category. Think about ways to connect the content of your project with the look of your exhibit. The only limit is your imagination and ability to transport your project to a competition!

A Closer Look at History Day Exhibits

A good design doesn't just jazz up your exhibit; it helps express your ideas. Can you guess what this exhibit is about without even reading the text? The cut-out of Rosie the Riveter lets the viewer immediately know the project's topic. The student took the theme a step further by using a red, white, and blue color scheme to convey the patriotic aspects of her topic.

History Day isn't about glitz. The student has a simple, effective design for a project with a clear argument and solid research.
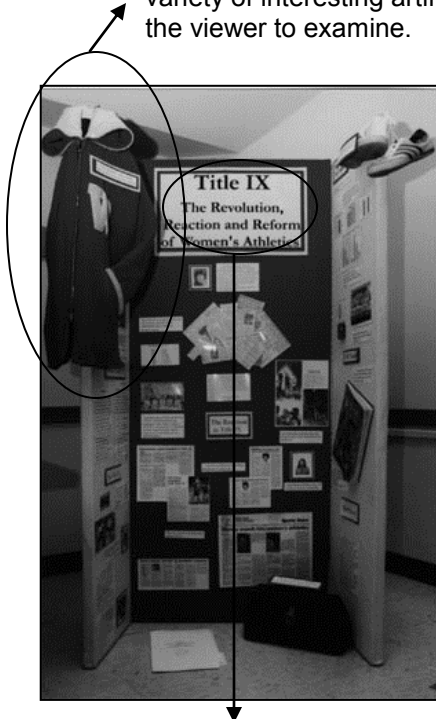
History Day exhibits come in all shapes and sizes, but there are several common characteristics you can see in many good exhibits. Check out these exhibits from other Wisconsin students!

The thesis and main argument are very clear to the viewer in this project. The student used a larger font and a bold border to immediately attract your attention

Photographs, newspapers, and sheet music are just a few of the primary sources that the student was able to incorporate into the project to prove her argument.

This exhibit incorporates a variety of interesting artifacts for the viewer to examine.

The theme for the year this project was created was "Revolution, Reaction, Reform." To show the topic's connection to the theme, the student used words from the theme in the title and section headings.

This project was about the journey that immigrants took through Ellis Island to their new lives in America. To connect the project to the topic, the students used an old suitcase as the frame for their exhibit. They made sure their argument stood out and divided up the space to give the exhibit an organizational structure in the same way they would have if they had used an exhibit board.

Tips for Creating a Spectacular NHD Exhibit

Planning

Getting Started
After you finish your research, make an outline for your exhibit, just as you would before you write a paper. Include the main arguments and points that you would like to make in the exhibit. Using this outline, you'll be able to see what the main sections of your exhibit need to be in order to support your argument and convey it to the viewer.

Plan It Out
Plan out your exhibit with a simple sketch before you start to create the full-scale project.

Connect Content to Design
Let the topic of your project inspire the design of your exhibit. What visual look can you give your exhibit that will connect the appearance of your project to your topic? This can be as simple as using appropriate colors. A project about women's suffrage, for example, would be striking using purple and gold, colors commonly associated with the movement. In the past, students have been able to connect the look of their project with the content on even larger scales. Students have created projects about conservation that look like trees, projects about education reform that look like school houses and exhibits about wars that have included dioramas of battle scenes.
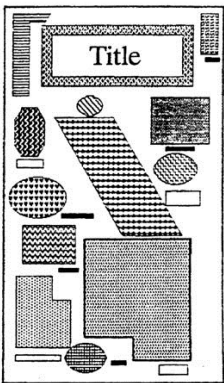
Divide and Conquer
Split your outline into different parts. Organizing your exhibit into logical sections will make it easier for you to assemble and easier for your viewer to understand what you are trying to say. What sections might you need in your exhibit? Background? Significance? Historical Context? Outcomes? Relation to Theme?

What's Your Point?
No matter what type of exhibit you decide to create, what topic you choose, or what division you are in, it is important to make sure that your argument (thesis) is clear **in the project itself**. Your argument should be the first thing the viewer looks at so they know right away what you will be proving in your exhibit. It should be concise and well-written. Usually students do this by making sure the argument is located where the viewers' eyes will look first, usually in the center in a larger font.
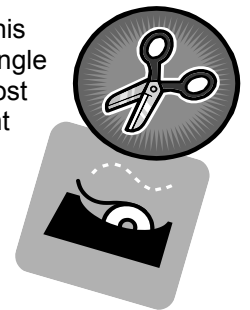
Putting It All Together

Avoid Clutter
It is always tempting to try to get as much on your exhibit panels as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. You don't have to put every single photo, drawing, and map that you found onto your exhibit. Try to select only the most important items for your project boards. Clarity and organization are most important goals for this project. Everything should have a reason for being on your exhibit.

Content is More Important Than Glitz
Fancy exhibits are nice to look at and can be a lot of fun to create—but remember that your historical argument is the most important part of your exhibit.

A cluttered exhibit can leave your viewers feeling overwhelmed and unsure about the argument you are trying to make.
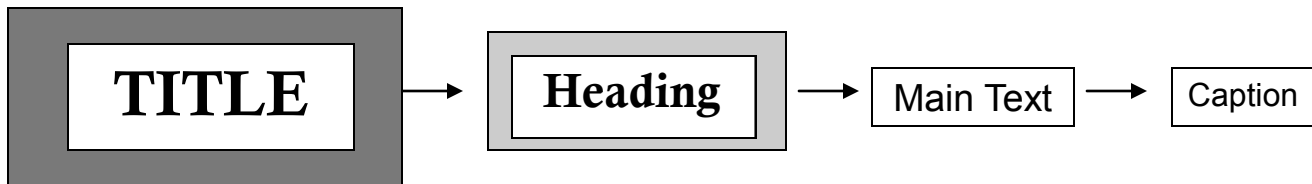
A Note on the Quote

Quotations can be an effective way of using historical evidence to support your argument. Sometimes, a quote from the historical figure just says it better than you could say it yourself.

Only original words (i.e. words written by you) count toward the word limit, so quotations do not take away from your 500 words. Quotations should not, however, be used just to "get around" the word limit. Using quotations this way and covering your exhibit with tons of quotes can easily make your exhibit cluttered and overwhelming for the viewer. The important aspects of your NHD project, your argument, analysis and interpretation, should stand out. It is important, therefore, to make sure that there is a reason for everything you put up on your exhibit and that it is well organized.

Labels

Once you've divided up your information into sections, you should make sure to label those sections. The labels you use for your title and main ideas are important because they direct the viewer's eye around your project. Remember: **Big Idea=Big Font**. You will want to put your title in the largest font on your exhibit and then scale the rest of your fonts down according to their importance.

TITLE → **Heading** → Main Text → Caption

One way to make your labels stand out is to have the writing on a light colored piece of paper with a darker background or matting behind it. This can be done with construction paper, tag board, or mat board. Dark black lettering makes your labels easier to read. Photographs and written materials will also stand out more on backgrounds.

Captions & Credits

Captions can be very useful in showing how a particular illustration or item you've included in your exhibit helps

prove your point. Which of the following captions do *you* think would work best with the political cartoon on the right about former Wisconsin Governor Robert La Follette? Why?

    A. Political Cartoon about Governor La Follette
    B. Governor La Follette's supporters championed his reforms as beneficial for
       citizens of the state.

Credits are required for all images and quoted material. See the NHD Rulebook for details.

Keep it Neat

You've spent a lot of energy researching and creating your exhibit. Take the time to give it some extra polish. Make sure you've checked your spelling and grammar. Make sure you've cut and glued things to your exhibit board as neatly as possible.
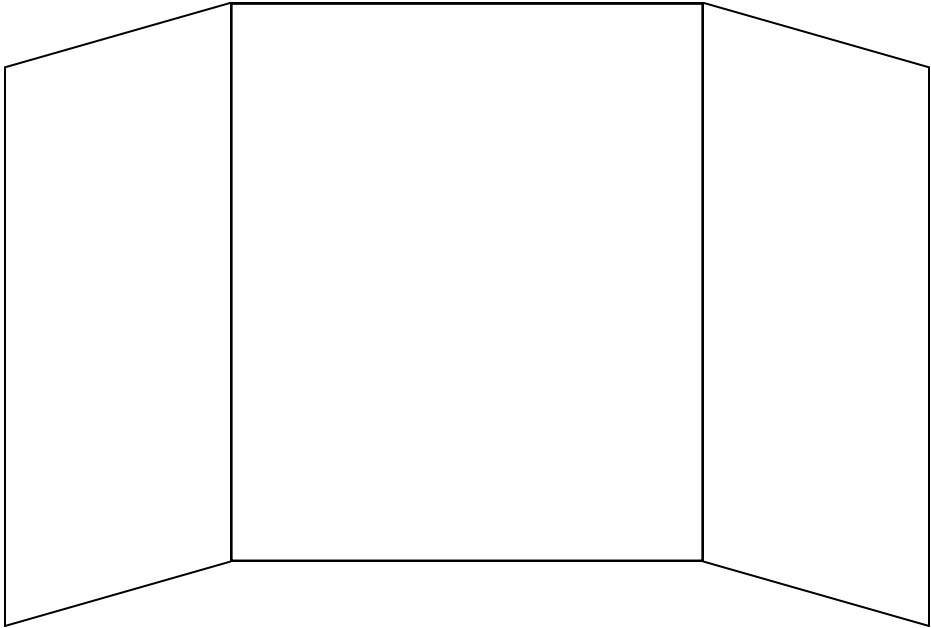
Look It Over

The Exhibit Stands Alone

When evaluating NHD exhibits, judges should be able to find all the information about your topic in your exhibit itself. *The exhibit has to stand on its own*. Have someone who has never seen your exhibit look at it (a friend, teacher, neighbor, etc). Without saying anything, let them read through the entire exhibit. Then, ask them a few questions to see if you have communicated your argument clearly: What am I trying to prove in my exhibit? What evidence have I shown to support that argument? What do you like about my exhibit? What is confusing to you?

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

History Day Exhibit Planning

Title:

Thesis:

Connection to Theme:

Design and Color Ideas:

Main ideas that support my thesis:
-
-
-
-
-
-

Main sections to organize my exhibit:
-
-
-
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-
-

Possible illustrations to use:

What are the qualities of a good exhibit?

The qualities that a judge is looking for in your NHD exhibit are written right on the evaluation sheet. Listed below are the same criteria judges will use to evaluate your project. After you create your exhibit, 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 exhibit is by far the most important part!)

- ☐ **My exhibit is historically accurate:** All the information in my exhibit is true to the best of my knowledge.
- ☐ **I show analysis and interpretation:** My exhibit doesn't just recount facts or tell a story. I interpret and analyze my topic. My exhibit has a strong central thesis or argument that I prove. I can point to where I state my thesis on my exhibit.
- ☐ **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 exhibit. 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 exhibit itself.
- ☐ **I demonstrate the significance of my topic in history and draw conclusions:** My exhibit 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 exhibit and written materials are original, clear, appropriate and organized:** I have an organized and well written project. I was careful to avoid plagiarism and I have double checked spelling and grammar in my exhibit, process paper and bibliography.
- ☐ **My exhibit is organized, has visual impact, correctly uses maps, photos, etc:** I thought about the overall design and organization to my project. I chose my visual illustrations carefully to help prove my argument. I used colors and fonts that are readable.