

HISTORY DAY RESEARCH STARTER

Sleuthing the Past

Good historians are like detectives – they investigate, search for evidence, and dig into records to find more sources. Then they piece together what happened based upon the evidence they find. For your History Day project, you’ll do essentially the same thing. Start by learning all you can from experts on your topic, then search for and analyze primary sources.

1 Start with credible secondary sources

A credible secondary source is written by an expert on the topic (preferably a historian). Secondary sources include articles from professional journals, articles from the internet, and books from the library. Wikipedia is not a credible secondary source, but its articles can help you find better sources to use.

Tips for finding good secondary sources:

- Search for books at your local library or at Utah’s Online Library (formerly PIONEER, <http://onlinelibrary.uen.org>). If your library does not have the book you want, you can usually request it from a partner library by placing a hold on the book.
- Search for articles through your local library or the Utah Online Library. Good article databases include EBSCO, JSTOR, and WorldCat.
- There are specialized historical journals on almost every topic (Western history, American history, Utah history, history of science, women’s history, and so on) that contain excellent secondary source articles.
- Look at the bottom of an online article for its citations, then go find those articles or books.
- Look for secondary sources that show different sides of the story.
- Ask – Who wrote this? Are they an expert? If not, don’t use it.

2 Read your secondary sources and take notes

These sources should give you a good understanding of the events you are covering, including important dates, names, and facts. They should also explore the background events leading up to your topic, the **historical context** (the social, cultural, and political circumstances in that time and place), and the consequences or outcomes.

Take notes using a notebook, a Google Doc, or Noodle Tools. Write down sentences you might want to quote exactly as they are written. Use quotation marks to show they are quotes.

Record the citation information for each source using a History Day Source Tracker or Noodle Tools, and keep this information attached to your notes.

3 Search for primary sources – voices from the past

Primary sources are materials that were **created at that time** in history. They include eyewitness accounts, newspaper and magazine articles, letters, diaries, books, government records, court cases, laws, photographs, paintings, drawings, maps, images, artifacts, clothing, tools, and objects. Interviews with people who were involved in the historical event are primary sources – these are called oral histories.

Primary sources are usually kept in archives, special collections, and libraries. If there are materials relevant to your topic at an archive near you, make an appointment to go and look at them.

Thousands of primary sources have been digitized and are available to researchers online. For links to high-quality online repositories, go to <https://heritage.utah.gov/history/uhd-research-resources>.

SLEUTHING TIP - To find out where the primary sources for your topic are held, look in the footnotes/endnotes or bibliography of good secondary sources.

4 Analyze your sources

Examine each source and ask questions such as...

- Who created this? When did they create it? Who was able to read or see it?
- Why was it created? What was its purpose?
- What does the image show? What does the document say?
- What is the point of view? (Example: is it proslavery or antislavery?)
- Is there something missing? What questions do you have after examining this artifact? How can you answer your questions?

Take notes and record the citation information for each source as you go.

5 Balance your research

- Find and use sources that show differing points of view.
- Use a variety of types of sources, not just one or two.
- Use books as well as websites.

6 Keep digging!

Research often builds its own momentum. When you find a lead, chase it down. Do your sources make you wonder about something? See if you can uncover an answer by doing more research.