

National History Day 2013 Theme:

TURNING POINTS IN HISTORY: PEOPLE, IDEAS, EVENTS

By Adrienne Pritchard

Adrienne Pritchard is the Contest Manager for National History Day.

Congratulations on beginning your National History Day journey! This year's theme is *Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events*. For those of you who have traveled this road before, you know that creating a great NHD project takes you out of the classroom and into exciting libraries, museums and archives in search of primary sources related to your topic. And since you get to choose the topic, you know that you will be interested in learning about it! You will discover history firsthand - seeing the very documents or historic sites that you read about in your textbook and, based on your research, come to your own conclusions about historical events. For those of you who are brand new to the National History Day experience, welcome!

You may be wondering where to begin this challenge and to that question we answer, right here! Reading through this theme sheet will give you guidance on the 2013 theme, *Turning Points in History*, helping you to successfully choose an interesting historical topic to research for your project.

Perhaps the first question you are asking yourself is, what exactly is a turning point in history? The dictionary defines "turning point" as a point at which a decisive change takes place. So a turning point in history is more than just an important event that happened a long time ago. It is an idea, event or action that directly, and sometimes indirectly, caused change. This change could be social or cultural, affecting a society's way of thinking or way of acting. It could be political, leading to new legislation or to a new government taking charge. It could be economic, affecting how goods are produced, bought and sold, or how much or how little a society has to spend on such items. A turning point can even cause all of these changes and more.

Okay, you say, but how do I know what changes my topic has caused? Ah, good question. This is where you begin to dig for information about the time period in which it occurred, where it happened, the people involved and what else was going on in that area at that time. In other words, you are studying the context of your topic. This is one of the most important

aspects of historical research. Events do not just happen all by themselves — there are always factors involving time, place and people that influence the causes and effects. Don't just think about how you understand the topic but also how people at the time thought about what was happening. It is important to examine the historical context of your topic so that you see your topic more clearly, understanding the "big picture." *Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events* always have at least two sides, or opposing perspectives. Part of being a thorough researcher is looking at a topic from all angles to see the whole story. Discovering the historical background of your topic will allow you to do this.



Now that you have a better idea of the historical context of your topic, you can narrow in on the turning point more precisely. What act, idea or event caused a change in how people thought or what they did? How about the effects: new ideas, new laws, new technologies, new cultural standards? And how did these develop over time? What was the end result? Your answers to these questions

will provide the historical evidence you need to form a conclusion about the event's significance in history and the impact that it had. Speaking of significance in history, don't forget the very important "in history" part of the theme. To fit the theme, your topic must truly be historical and not just a current event or recent idea.

Remember that you can choose to focus on a turning point in local, state, national or world history. When many people think of significant turning points that changed the course of history, one of the first things that often comes to mind are wars. World War II significantly changed the hierarchy of nations as new global powers emerged and also altered large portions of the map as some nations were divided or added together with new borders and new identities. But to successfully choose a topic related to World War II, for example, you should focus on specific aspects of the war. An exhibit could discuss a turning point within the war, such as Guadalcanal in the Pacific or the invasion of Normandy on the European

front. A web site could examine the war itself as a turning point in a particular geographical area, or even in a specific aspect of life for a group of people. To sustain economic needs with so many men at war, women in the United States increasingly held jobs in previously male-dominated fields such as manufacturing. How did this become a turning point for women's equality, and how did it affect their lives after the war? Did this happen for women in other countries too?

Or what about human advancements? How was the discovery of penicillin a major turning point in medical care? A performance could show how agricultural innovations, such as irrigation and the use of fertilizer, changed how crops are grown, creating a much more efficient method that can produce food for millions of people. You could also look at Henry Ford and how his advancements in the manufacturing of automobiles changed the way goods were mass produced. How has society and the world economy changed as a result? A web site could explore how the Interstate Highway Act led to the staggering growth of the American suburbs and how that was a turning point in American society. Gutenberg's printing press was a crucial turning point, leading to greater access to information. How did this affect education and communication? What religious implications did this have? How did it help advance the fields of science and art?

Environmental factors and natural events can also be explored. You could look at how the discovery of gold in California shifted the American focus and launched the great westward expansion. How did this further affect land rights, relations with the Native Americans and the map of the United States? Or what about turning points in the business world? A paper could explain how the Sherman Anti-Trust Act changed the scene of big business monopolies and gave the U.S. federal government power to protect competition in trade. What effects did this have on the businesses, the people involved or future related events?



You should also think about new ideas and the people who have been a part of significant turning points. How was Gandhi's "Quit India" movement a catalyst for change in India? Did the British imprisonment of the Congress set the stage for the Muslim League to gain ground in its "Pakistan Movement?" Or what about the development of

the Impressionist movement in Paris? How did the artists' desire to capture change and fleeting moments change how people viewed art? A performance could explain how the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* was a significant turning point not only for civil rights, but also in the American public school system. People who brought the injustice and suffering of a group to the attention of the general public have also caused great change. A documentary could discover how the photography of Lewis Hine showcased the plight of child laborers. How did this lead to legislation that protected children in the workplace? What effects did this have on other aspects of manufacturing?

As you can see, the theme *Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events* has exciting possibilities for choosing a research topic. Think about the sorts of things you are interested in and then think about how they have changed the course of history. Almost any topic — from sports, to television, to science — can be turned into a National History Day project. You can begin brainstorming topic ideas with your classmates, your teachers and your parents. Read about areas of history that interest you and see what important turning points you discover. You can search on the internet or search through your textbook. It might be handy to carry a notebook with a list of topic ideas and as you find information, circle those you are interested in and cross off those that no longer seem appealing. Once you find the topic that fits the theme and interests you most, go ahead and jump right into research. Your local library is an excellent place to start!