

How to Craft a National History Day Exhibit

By Emily Schwenneker and Renae Cramer

The first step to start a National History Day project is to decide on a topic. When we started our project, we soon decided that we wanted to focus on a topic relatable to our area. Living close to the Mississippi river—and Emily having visited the Steamboat Arabia Museum—we decided to pursue steamboats. Next, we had to decide what type of project to create. With only six weeks to make our project, we chose to make an exhibit. It allowed us to be creative and yet challenged us to find and show our information in a visual manner, with 500 words or less.

Next came the research! We first used the internet, which allowed us to find background information and access museums and records on research databases. We also found many books on our topic. Thanks to the interlibrary loan program at our local library, we were able to access any book that we needed for our research. Because we were doing a group exhibit, we split up the books to read and shared important information with each other. Once we felt like we had a good understanding of steamboats, we decided to contact experts to interview them for more details. These experts ranged from a member of the Historical Society, to a professor, to a family friend of our advisor, who grew up around steamboats.

When we started writing out our information, we wrote about everything that we thought was important and related to the topic. In our first draft, we had over 1,000 words. Then came the challenging part: cutting over half of our information out of our story. We spent hours working on limiting the amount of details, while still relating it to the theme of Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History. To make the theme pop out on our board, we bolded the words revolution, reaction, and reform every time we used them in the project. We also had a thesis at the top of the board to sum up our project. When we saw that after cutting down our story, we had holes in the research, we decided to use quotes to help tell the tale. Because quotes do not count toward the word limit, we used many different books and resources to help us tell the story.

Our next step was putting together the board. Along with our research, we used many pictures and maps to catch the eye of judges and make it visually

appealing. To help make our story flow, we arranged related words, quotes, and pictures in clusters, which directed viewers through the information. Along with our board, we decided to include artifacts relevant to steamboats and their time period: we included wood for the lumber industry, fur and an authentic 1850s trap for the fur trade, cloth for the textile industry and immigration, china from an actual steamboat, and a steamboat pencil sharpener to show that they are still popular today. Creativity is a large part of the exhibit. For our board, we had stove pipes on either side to represent the smoke stacks on a steamboat.

As we advanced in the competition, we continually improved our project. We included maps and other records from the time period related to our topic. We also found newspapers in online archives that had stories and ads about steamboats that were very interesting. We decided that our project needed to include how steamboats impact the world today. The steamboats were replaced by barges, which are still used today to reduce the amount of goods that are transported on roadways.

With our experience, we highly recommend using an exhibit for a National History Day project. It is a great choice for people who want to use creativity and can keep their words concise. We loved our National History Day experience and would do it again in a heartbeat! We have learned not only about steamboats, but also of our own abilities.