

Selecting a Topic

Narrowing Down an Area of Interest

Selecting a History Day topic is a process of gradually narrowing down the area of history in which you are interested and focusing on a manageable subject. To start out, you should think about what historical events or periods most interest you. You can then look at the annual theme to see if there are subject areas that fit your ideas. For example, if you are interested in Native Americans and the theme is Rights in History, a natural topic would be treaty rights. At this point you may realize that it is impossible to look at the thousands of treaties between Native American tribes and the United States. This means that you have to take another step in the narrowing process and select a specific issue within the topic. Keeping in mind the available resources, you could then select a treaty involving Native Americans in New York State.

For instance, between 1784 and 1838 many treaties were made between the United States Government and the Six Nations of the Iroquois confederacy. These treaties often resulted in the loss of Iroquois lands. In the 1788 Fort Schuyler, the Onondagas lost all their lands in New York except a 100 square mile tract of land in Onondaga County, which includes the land on which the city of Syracuse now stands. In 1793, 1795, 1817, and 1822, the Onondagas lost sections of the 100 square mile until only 6100 acres of land remained to them. If the theme were Rights in History, the issue of the loss of Native American lands in New York State would be an appropriate topic.

The following summarizes an example of the topic selection process.

Interest:	Native Americans
Theme:	Rights in History
Topic:	Treaty Rights
Issue:	1788 Fort Schuyler Treaty

Choosing a Title

The topic and issue selected will also be reflected in the title of an entry. Titles do two things for an audience. First, they explain immediately what the topic is, and second, they can give a clue about the student's point of view on the topic. For example, the title for the above topic could be *Your Gain is Our Loss: The 1788 Fort Schuyler Treaty with Onondaga Nation*. This title not only explains the topic and issue but also gives a sense of the impact of this treaty on the Onondaga Nation.

Tips on Topic Selection

- The topic should be of interest to the student.
- The topic should clearly fit the year's theme.
- The topic should be in-depth and narrow in scope. It is better to focus on one issue in detail than to cover many issues superficially.
- The topic should reflect the availability of primary and secondary resources. A local topic is often a good choice, since primary documents are more likely to be available in the community in which an event occurred or in which a person lived.