

WEST TENNESSEE HISTORY DAY "TIPS OF THE TRADE"

NOVEMBER TIP:
DRAWING CONCLUSIONS, OR FINDING AN
ANSWER TO OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

With the research and analysis portions of our projects fast receding in the rear-view mirror, it is time to start drawing some conclusions. Historians work no more randomly at this stage than they do at any other. In fact, the same question that governed our research and analysis continues to guide us as we begin the mental work of adding up the information we've found. Indeed, our work to this point has been directed toward finding an answer to that question and what we're doing when we talk about drawing conclusions is really developing and spelling out that conclusion.

It is worth pausing here and returning to earlier metaphors about detecting and doctoring work. In neither case, does the detective or the doctor want to miss important information when she begins to draw conclusions about a person's guilt or a person's health. An overlooked piece of evidence could result in a wrongful conviction or a mistaken diagnosis. The stakes aren't quite as high when it comes to historical thinking, but missed or overlooked or ignored information can sink a project at the contest stage. How many times have we as teachers or students heard judges asking "but what about this thing or that thing?" or (my favorite), "how would your story look if you had taken into account X, Y, or Z?"

There's an easy way for us to avoid such a terrible fate, and good historical thinkers know it. In drawing conclusions, historians *take into account every single scrap of information they developed in the course of their research and analysis*. Nothing can be left out. We need to think about all those pieces because it is *information and evidence from primary sources that leads us to our conclusions*. We cannot override, overlook, or ignore any part of our evidence, not even the parts that make us uncomfortable. We have to let the facts lead us to our answers, whatever those answers happen to be. Anything short of that amounts to intellectual dishonesty.

Let's return to the imaginary student who is trying to decide whether or not the changes put into place by the Tennessee Valley Authority were tragedy or triumph. Suppose through her research she discovered that the TVA was tragic from the perspective of the people whose homes were flooded over but a triumph from the perspective of their neighbors who, in living on higher ground, were able to electrify their houses. Any conclusions she draws must reflect that ambiguity. Her answer (ie: conclusion!) would have to reflect that ambiguity and she would either have to argue/conclude that the TVA did not affect all Tennesseans equally OR she could narrow her project down and simply argue that the TVA was a tragedy from the perspective of those who were flooded. What she *cannot do*, at least not in a way that will pass muster with our judges, is conclude that the rural electrification project was beneficial to all Tennesseans. That would be incorrect based on her evidence.

Drawing conclusions takes a lot of back and forth thinking. In order to be sure that our answer "fits" the information we generated through research and analysis, we have to be careful to keep double-checking ourselves until we can be certain that our conclusions take into account every scrap of information we've developed through our research and analysis. There are a number of strategies we can use to help our students learn how to do this backing-and-forthing. For instance, we can divide students into teams, asking one side to play devil's advocate by reading all the evidence and then asking the other side how each piece of information fits into their thinking. There are also any number of worksheets available on the web that help walk students through the conclusion-drawing/argument-making/thesis-producing process. See, for example, [this handout](#) produced by tutors at the University of North Carolina. Our friends at MTSU's Teaching with Primary Sources have also produced a series of [worksheets](#) designed to guide students as they begin the work of drawing conclusions and arriving at answers. See especially the "[Writing from Documents Worksheet](#)" and "[Graphic Organizer Worksheets](#)."

Drawing sound and verifiable and honest conclusions is a vital step in the thinking process. It is worth doing well. In ensuring that they've taken every teeny bit of research into account in their conclusions, students not only stand a better chance of producing a well-argued and well-explained History Day project, they also reduce the possibility that a judge will later ask: "well, what about this, and what about that?"