



## West Tennessee History Day “Tips of the Trade”

### September Tip: Finding Answers

Now that our students have developed a research question (the topic of our August “tip”), the next step is to start digging for answers.

Historians find most of their answers in primary sources. This does not mean that we ignore secondary sources like books and journal articles. Secondary sources can help us understand why something took place when and where and how it did; they can also help us understand the long-term impact or consequences of a historical event. They are especially useful for gaining an understanding of historical context (the all-important “big picture”). The footnotes and endnotes in secondary sources can also point us toward potential primary sources. But, like any good detective, historians don’t rely on second-hand facts. We want our news from the primary source.

Our preference for primary sources means that we spend most of our research time rummaging around in libraries and archives: tracking down, examining, thinking about, weighing, and interpreting information we glean from primary sources. Primary source research is central to good research, and the best History Day projects reflect deep research in a wide selection of primary sources. It is no accident that research is weighted heavily by History Day judges. It is that important.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> If your students find it difficult to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, we’ve attached a worksheet that you can use to give them more practice.

But where does a researcher start? How do we know what kind of sources to look at? How do we find them? Libraries, after all, are pretty big and daunting. They hold lots of stuff.

Never fear. The answer is in our research question. If we know what we want to figure out, we already know where to look. This is why we don't want too big of a question. Trying to research "the history of the world, part 1," would take multiple lifetimes to complete. *The best research questions tend to be more tightly focused.* For instance, if a student were interested in figuring out whether or not the Salem Witch Trials were *a Triumph or a Tragedy*, she's already got a pretty good road map for her research buried in her question: *she would want to start by looking at primary sources produced in and around New England during and shortly after the witch trials.* Lucky for us, a large number of the primary sources produced in this period and place are available online. Beside those at the [Massachusetts Historical Society](#), our student can find additional primary sources at the [University of Virginia](#), which includes links to still more digital collections.

But let's not stop there. If our student were interested in figuring out whether or not creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority was a *Triumph or Tragedy* in her own community, and for whom, she too has a built-in research guide: she would want to start by digging through local, state, and maybe national archives looking specifically for materials that would help her understand how the TVA affected her home town. Such collections include those maintained by the [Tennessee Valley Authority](#), the federal agency created by Congress in 1933, the [Special Collections Library at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville](#), the [North Carolina State University Library](#), the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the East Tennessee Historical Society. Using the name of her community, she should be able to zero in on sources that will help her answer her research question.

Of course, in narrowing a research question down to something manageable, a student might discover that there are no primary sources in which to look for answers. Don't worry. This is a common problem that all historians face. It is also an easy problem to solve. We simply adjust our questions, making them less narrow and a little bigger. Thus if our TVA scholar cannot find anything out about her home community, she might want to broaden her inquiry to include her county or region instead. This would allow her to expand her search through the TVA's records.

But whatever the focus of a project – a small village in colonial New England or a remote valley in the mountains of east Tennessee – student researchers *need to dig widely* within the parameters of the research question. Like a doctor, a historian does not stop at the first piece of information. We need to look at *all sides of the history* we're trying to explain. The student studying the Salem Witch Trials needs to examine the event from the perspective of prosecutors as well as that of the persecuted. She might want to find primary sources that help her understand the perspective of the Native Americans who lived in and around Salem too. The student studying the TVA would want to examine that history from the perspective of government authorities, planners, and engineers as well as the workers who built the dams and the people who lived in the TVA's path. This means, in turn, that none of us can safely restrict ourselves to any one kind of source. To get at different perspectives we have to examine different sources. Photographs, for instance, can only tell a part of a story and never the whole of a story. In order

to gather all the facts, we need to look at lots of sources: newspapers, government reports, legal documents, court transcripts, personal correspondence, maps, diaries, so on, and so forth.

Just as a doctor must exhaust all possibilities by drawing blood, poking, prodding, x-raying, and examining, so too must historians poke, prod, and read deeply in primary sources for historical information. Neither historians nor doctors can deliver satisfactory “diagnoses” without first gathering all the facts. Neither of us want to overlook important clues or information. Although the stakes are higher in the medical field (missed diagnoses can be deadly!), a missed “diagnosis” in historical research can lead us astray. What if the one thing we forgot to look at changes the story entirely? Bad or incomplete data produces bad or incomplete answers. Strong History Day projects require all of the facts. Let’s do it!