



Welcome to the 2018 edition of West Tennessee History Day “Tips of the Trade.” Published monthly through December, our tip sheets offer advice on every aspect of a History Day project from inception to finished product. Because History Day projects are only as good as the questions that launch them, that’s where we’ll start. Next month, we’ll offer tips on the research phase of a History Day project, addressing such things as how to identify the primary sources most likely to yield answers to our research questions.

This year’s theme is “**Triumph and Tragedy in History.**” It’s a great theme, and one that lends itself to a wide range of exciting projects, but as noted above, the **best projects are those that start with a question. This makes sense.** The first thing any historian does is to ask a question about the past. It is only when we ask a question, that we can find our answers and draw our conclusions. Like any good detective, we want to know **how** and **why** something happened. It’s not enough to say, for instance, that we found a dead body on our doorstep. We want to know why and how that dead body came to be there, and why or how his (or her) death matters. As historians, our duty is to ask why something happened when and how it did in the past, ask what it meant that the thing happened (this is what we mean when we talk about historical consequences), and then, in keeping with this year’s theme, whether or not that thing that happened was a triumph or a tragedy.

It is common for our students to start they History Day year by choosing a topic. That’s great. They need to do that. **But questions are not topics.** Think of a topic as the larger field in which historians work. One of us might be interested in the *topic* of Civil War, another might be interested in the *topic* of Civil Rights, and yet a third person might be interested in the *topic* of Native American history. National History Day offers sample topics in its annual [theme book](#); Tennessee-based topics can be found on the Tennessee History Day website, and both are good starting points. But topics are not our stopping points. Like any historian, our students **need to convert those topics into questions.** Good questions give us something to research, to puzzle over, to answer, and ultimately, to explain. This means that that the first thing students must do after identifying a topic, is to convert that topic into a *how* or *why* kind of question.

Take for instance one of those perennially popular *topics*, the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692-1693. Using this year's theme, this *topic* lends itself to a number of research questions: "why did the witch trials take place in New England and not in any other part of the colonies?" "Why did the witch trials take place in those particular years?" "Why were women targeted and not men?" "Why and how did the trials end?" **It is in seeking out answers to questions like these**, that our students will be in a position to decide if the Salem Witchcraft Trials were a tragedy or a triumph.

Depending on the particular question the student asked and the information she dug out of her primary sources, the student could arguably conclude that the witchcraft trials were a triumph for men and a tragedy for women. (After all, most of those who were tried and executed were women, while the judges and juries were men.) Or, the answer to her question might help her decide whether or not the witchcraft trials were a tragedy or triumph for American jurisprudence, or whether the witchcraft trials were a tragedy or a triumph in terms of religious or secular society. **In other words, our research questions help us dig out the kind of information that then enables us to determine whether or not the thing we're studying should be considered a *triumph* or *tragedy*.**

Let's try another example: Eminent Domaine. This is a big issue in Tennessee's history, what with the TVA, our plentiful state and national parks, and the miles of freeway that run back and forth across our state. A student might refine her interest in the *topic* of Eminent Domaine by asking *how* it played out in her own community. In seeking an answer to that question, the student would likely uncover all sorts of information about the introduction of electrical power, the creation of lakes, or the displacement of entire populations. As she learns these details and gathers this information, she'll be thinking about whether or not Eminent Domaine as experienced in her community was a *tragedy* or a *triumph*, for whom, and why. Depending on the perspective she takes, she could conceivably argue either way. If studied from the perspective of law makers, engineers, and the people who now had lights in their houses, our student might conclude that the TVA was a triumph of engineering, an innovation that made people's lives better. But if she took the perspective of people who lost their homes to rising waters, of the wildlife that lost its native habitat, or of tourists who wanted to see something more pristine than power lines, she might conclude that the TVA was a tragedy: an innovation that cost people their homes, cost deer and bobcat their lives, and ruined the view.

As was the case with the first example about the Salem Witch Trials, the Eminent Domaine student's research question was her shovel and pick axe. She used her research question to dig relevant information out of the primary sources she consulted. Once exposed to the air, that information then allowed her to decide if Eminent Domaine as experienced in her community was a *triumph* or a *tragedy*, for whom, and why.

To reiterate: a topic is the field of interest. A question is the tool we use to excavate certain areas within that field of interest in order to develop information that we can then use to reflect on the annual theme. In other words, we don't "research" tragedy or triumph. We research a part of the past and then decide whether or not what we find can be understood as a tragedy or a triumph.

Or to put it more simply: Questions come first. Answers (also known as conclusions) come last.

