

Communication in History: The Key to Understanding

National History Day 2020-21

This introduction was adapted from the National History Day Theme Narrative for the North Carolina audience.

National History Day chooses a different theme each year to unite all National History Day projects. While your topic must connect to the annual theme, the theme is broad enough for you to pick a topic from any time period or place. It is designed to help you go beyond the names and dates in your research to finding the impact and significance it has had on the past and may continue to have on the present and future.

During the 2020–2021 school year, the annual theme is **Communication in History: The Key to Understanding**. This theme asks you to consider how people exchange information and interact with each other. You have the chance to explore how the methods and modes of communication have changed over time, and how they have shaped the present. Major inventions like the telephone, the telegraph, and the television stand out in our minds as obvious examples of how communication has changed over time. Yet, communication is more than just these inventions. It is about how words, thoughts, or ideas are exchanged throughout history.

The Act of Communication

Merriam-Webster defines communication as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” History is filled with stories about people, groups or nations either communicating or failing to communicate with each other. To understand these stories, we must go beyond common definitions of communication and recognize the many ways people communicate.

Types of Communication

Written Communication

You could explore letter writing. How were letters used as a means of communication? What did people write about in letters? Did they write to the government, family, or friends? How does the tone change based on the recipient or the topic? Students might explore letters written by women during the American Civil War and investigate what they wrote about. What was the purpose of the letters? To whom did they send these letters? Why did they feel the need to voice their thoughts during the American Civil War?

You could also research the invention of the printing press, and how it made mass-producing written word easier. How did the mass production of books and other printed materials help to shape society? On a more regional scale, you could examine how it was not until 1749 that North Carolina gained its first printer and printing press. Several decades prior, Lord Proprietor Sir William Berkeley expressed his relief that North Carolina had “no free schools and no printing, and I hope we shall have none these hundred years.” What does this quote tell us about the power of communication?

Telecommunication

If you are interested in global history or technology, you might look to the spread of telecommunication lines across the globe. In 1872, the development of Australia’s first international telecommunication system linked them to Asia. How did this shape international diplomacy?

You can also research the importance of the radio in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The radio provided a more

accessible way to get updates on popular culture, weather, and daily news.

The invention of the television changed how we both communicate and learn about different events. How was press coverage of the Vietnam War different from that of previous wars? What was television's impact on public opinion? Compare the footage of the 1968 Democratic and Republican Conventions. How did those broadcasts influence the vote?

Public Gatherings and Speeches

Consider exploring how conventions, exhibitions, public gatherings, and speeches helped people communicate ideas and opinions with each other. World's Fairs (also known as World Expositions), in which nations showed off their most recent advancements, exploded in the 1800s. Why might countries want to showcase their achievements? Why might that be important?

Another example is the use of conventions by social activists to speak out on topics like abolition, woman suffrage, temperance, and other social reforms. The Declaration of Sentiments address given at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention revealed that suffragists wanted equality and voting rights. How did the suffragists shape their arguments? Was the message they conveyed well received, or did it lead to a broader discussion?

Locally, students might look to Jacob Henry's rousing 1809 speech defending his seat in the North Carolina House of Commons after a call for him to vacate was made due to his faith. How did he communicate his equal standing and rights to his peers that would decide his seat's fate?

Language

As a key way that we communicate with each other, language is another option for you to examine. What impact did geographic barriers and years of isolation have on the residents of Ocracoke, Harkers Island, and other communities along the North Carolina Outer Banks?

During World War I soldiers from the Eastern Band of Cherokee used the Cherokee language as a method to safely transmit important military communications despite frequent interceptions from German troops. What impact did this key communication have on the war and the second one to follow?

Language does not always involve the physical act of speaking. Developed in the early nineteenth century, American Sign Language (ASL) helped individuals with hearing impairments communicate. What barriers did hearing-impaired individuals experience before the use of ASL? Similarly, the written language of Braille has helped those with visual impairments communicate. Who invented it, and why? Did it break barriers or create more challenges?

Images and imagery

You can explore how images and imagery can also be used for communication. They can be used to express thoughts, opinions, or ideas. Portraits, photographs, and art convey meaning. What do the photographs of Durham's Hugh Mangum tell us? What about the photography of Bayard Wootten?

You could also look to the petroglyphs of Judaculla Rock in Jackson County, North Carolina or the hieroglyphs and drawings created by Ancient Egyptians. What do those images convey about their societies? Do they communicate what was deemed to be important whether it be about family, war, nature, or their culture in general?

During World War I the poster was used as a crucial tool in the war. How did different countries use imagery in their wartime posters to inspire military recruitment and financial support even if they were far removed from the war's frontlines?

The Key to Understanding

Communication, in and of itself, is defined by the exchange of ideas, news, or information. Yet, there is another side to communication. Do we understand what is told to us?

American journalist Sydney J. Harris wrote, “‘information’ and ‘communication’ are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.” Information is extremely important, but if we fail to communicate the information, it often leads to unintended results.

Important to Remember

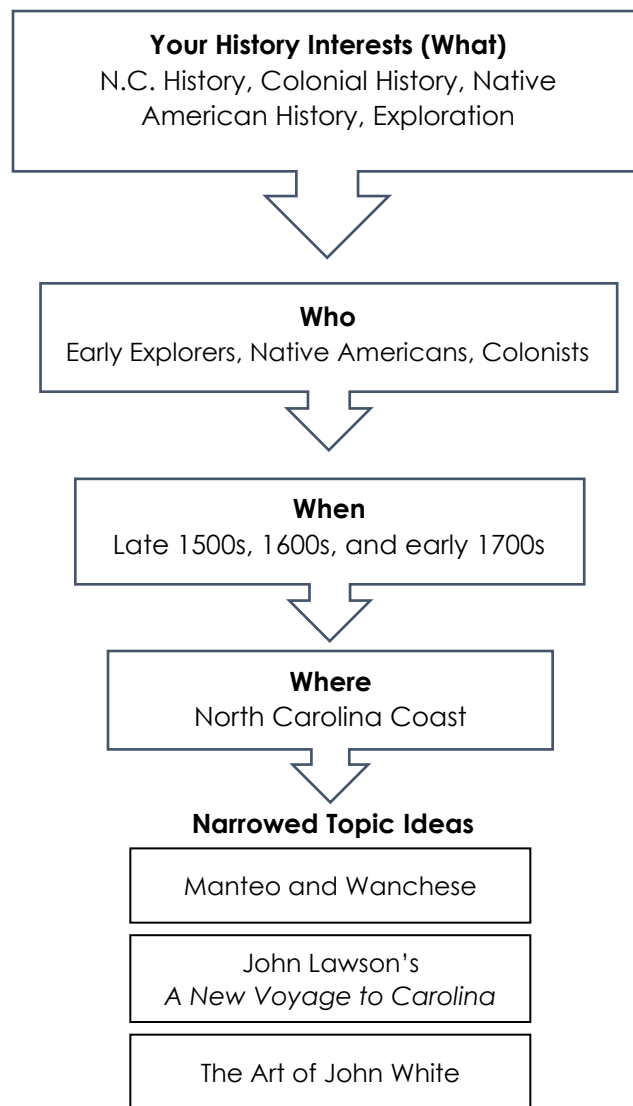
As you hunt for topics, do not forget that the most important part is for your topic to be able to demonstrate why it matters today. As NHD likes to ask, “so what?” Did the communication or failure to communicate have a lasting impact on society? Did it inspire future events that might not have otherwise been possible? Remember that all communication happens as part of a larger story.

Ultimately, the answers to these questions must be found through **research**. Keep an **open mind** as you search your sources and discover **examples of communication**.

Narrowing Down a Topic

As you choose your topic, also remember not to be too broad. A topic such as, “Communicating the Horrors of Slavery: 19th-century American Slave Narratives,” might seem like a good choice at first, but it covers way too much time, people, and places. Broad topics like this one might make finding sources easy, but it will be that much harder to make a clear argument and stay within the word or time limits in your project category. Narrowing the topic down to something like, “Harriet Jacobs: Using Her Story to Communicate the Horrors of Slavery,” will help focus your research and the argument you would like to present.

The chart to the right shows how you can use **Who**, **What**, **When**, and **Where** questions to narrow down your broad history interests into tight topic ideas.



See the next page for topic ideas in North Carolina history.

N.C. History Topic Ideas

These topic ideas explore possible connections to this year's theme within North Carolina history. Though sorted by type of history, many topic ideas fit into multiple sections so explore the list carefully. Some ideas will need to be narrowed down based on how you would like to approach the topic. A great place to start exploring many of these topics is on www.NCpedia.org.

African American History

1871 "Klan Hearings"
African American Newspapers in N.C.
David Walker's *Appeal*
Elizabeth Keckly's Memoir
Ernie Barnes
Freedmen's Conventions in 1865 and 1866
George Moses Horton
Hannah Bond
Harriet Jacobs
Lunsford Lane
Moses Grandy
N.C. Colored Industrial Association Fair
Nina Simone
Omar ibn Said (or Omar ben Saeed)
Search for Family Lost in Slavery after the Civil War
The Negro Motorist Green Book in N.C.
Wilmington Race Riots

Early Colonial History - American Revolution

1669 Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina
A Pledge to Violate the Stamp Act
Artwork of John White
Committees of Correspondence
Halifax Resolves
James Davis
Legend of the Mecklenburg Declaration
Letter from "Atticus" to William Tryon
Mecklenburg Resolves
Postal Roads in Colonial N.C.
The Dare Stones
Thomas Harriot

Environmental or Agricultural History

John Lawson's *A New Voyage to Carolina*
N.C. State Agricultural Society & the State Fair
NC Farm Bureau
North Carolina Exposition of 1884
Progressive Farmer
The Discoveries of John Lederer

Literary History

Carl August Sandburg
John MacRae
Maya Angelou
Thomas Wolfe
William Sidney Porter "O. Henry"

Native American History

Judaculla Rock
Manteo and Wanchese
Paint Rock in Madison County
Sequoyah, inventor of Cherokee syllabary
WWI Eastern Band Cherokee "Code Talkers"

News & Broadcasting

Billy Borne (Political Cartoonist)
Charles Kuralt
Charlotte's WBTV (Television)
Edward Roscoe Murrow (Radio)
Harry Golden and the *Carolina Israelite*
"Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer"
Jesse Helms & Viewpoint (Television)
Joseph Gales
North-Carolina Gazette (N.C.'s First Paper)
Raleigh Register (N.C.'s First Daily Paper)
Robert Lee Vann
Walter Hines Page's "The Mummy Letters"
WBT Charlotte (Radio)
WUNC (Radio)

Oral Tradition

Felix Walker and "Talking Buncombe"
Hoi Toiders
Hollerin' Contest
N.C. Crime Ballads
N.C. Folklore

Political History

Jacob Henry
N.C. Debates Evolution
Ratification of the Federal Constitution in N.C.
Helms-Hunt Senate Race
Speaker Ban Law
Stanly-Spaight Duel

Science, Technology, Engineering & Invention

Development of the Bar Code
Reginald Fessenden Wireless Experiments
X-Ray experiments in North Carolina

Women's History

Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*
Edenton Tea Party
Ella May Wiggins
Emeline Pigott
Janet Schaw
Mary Baryard Devereux Clarke
Mary Oates Spratt Van Landingham