

Tackling the Thesis Statement


Getting started

Topics have been chosen, research is in full swing, students are starting to ponder color schemes and costume choices. That can only mean that the time for one of the most difficult steps in the process is at hand: the writing of the thesis statement.

A thesis statement is a central thought that holds your entire National History Day (NHD) project together. Early in the research process we like to call this a *working thesis*; as you gather your information, this thought can, and probably should, evolve.

The thesis statement, best written when students are in the middle of their research so the statement is based on knowledge but still has a chance to be flexible, helps direct students through their argument and, later, judges and teachers through the project's ultimate point. It is so important, and for a lot of students, so daunting.

By the time you present your NHD project, however, you need to have a concrete thesis that is supported by evidence.

 **Thesis = Topic + Theme + Impact.**

In other words, you are not just introducing your topic, you are creating an argument that expresses your topic's significance and demonstrates how the theme plays a central part.

Developing a thesis statement

There are no hard and fast rules for thesis-statement writing, but here are a couple of guidelines to ease students' path.

- **Keep it short.** Thesis statements should hover between 40-60 words. Too short, and there's not enough information to explain the argument. Too long, and too many details have been included. Plus, if the students are creating an exhibit, and they only have 500 student-composed words to use, it doesn't make sense to use up 100 of those words on just the thesis.
- **Include all five W's.** The thesis is the first thing the viewer reads, so we should know immediately the who-what-where-when, and also the why-is-this-important.
- **Include the theme words.** Judges and teachers need to know how the topic relates to the theme, especially if the topic is obscure, extremely narrow, or isn't immediately clear in its connection to the theme words.
- **Leave facts out, put arguments in.** We don't need to see every detail of the topic in the thesis. Leave those for the project itself. What we need to see in the thesis is the student's argument, or the point he/she is trying to make.
- **Write, revise, research, revise.** Students should not use the first draft of their thesis statement, but instead should revise based on feedback, go back to their research or conduct new research to make sure the thesis is accurate, and then revise once more.

A thesis statement explains what you believe to be the significance and impact of your topic. Your opinion of your topic should be guided by your research. National History Day says that a good thesis statement should:

- Addresses a narrow topic;
- Explains what the researcher believes to be the historical significance of the topic;
- Connects your topic to the National History Day theme.

The steps below, borrowed from Wisconsin History Day's *A Student Guide to National History Day*, provides easy to follow guidance on developing a thesis statement that relates to the National History Day theme.

Step 1: "Immigration to Milwaukee."

This is not a thesis statement yet because it doesn't address a specific, narrow issue related to immigration to Milwaukee. What will the project examine? Health and sanitation in immigrant neighborhoods? Labor issues? The polka? There are thousands of immigration topics that a historian could research about Milwaukee. This topic needs to be narrowed quite a bit before it can be used to build a thesis.

Step 2: "Lizzie Black Kander and Jewish immigration to Milwaukee from 1880-1920."

This is a nice and narrow topic, but it's still not a thesis. This phrase expresses no opinion and makes no argument about the significance of Kander and Jewish immigration.

Step 3: "Lizzie Black Kander used her cooking classes and The Settlement Cookbook to teach Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants about American culture."

This sentence is close to a thesis statement, but it isn't quite there yet. The researcher now shows an opinion about the purpose of Kander's work, but still doesn't tell us why the topic is significant. What effects did The Settlement Cookbook and her cooking classes have? How did Kander's actions change the lives of Jewish immigrants?

Step 4: "Through her cooking classes and The Settlement Cookbook, Lizzie Black Kander introduced Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants to American culture, helping them assimilate and avoid ethnic discrimination."

We have a winner! This thesis looks at a narrow topic, expresses an opinion, and evaluates the significance of the topic. A History Day project based on this thesis statement would discuss Kander's work and show evidence that she helped immigrants assimilate and avoid discrimination.