

Chicago Metro History Fair Exhibits

What is an Exhibit?

An exhibit is a visual representation of your research and interpretation of your topic's significance in history. Your exhibit will look a lot like a small version of an exhibit you might see in a museum. You may have already made something similar to an exhibit if you have ever created a poster to display your research or ideas, but your History Fair project will probably be more detailed.

Creating an exhibit gives you the opportunity to use a variety of visual materials to make your argument. In addition to text, you can use things like photographs, maps, graphs, charts, paintings, timelines, or artifacts. You can also incorporate primary sources into your exhibit – including quotations, letters, newspaper articles, and more. Using a variety of elements will help you create a rich and informative exhibit.



The Basic Framework

- **Size Limit:** The overall size of your exhibit when displayed can be up to 40 inches wide, 30 inches deep, and 6 feet high. Exhibits must be free-standing and can be constructed in any shape that fits the size restrictions.
- **Presenting Your Ideas:** Your project will include a title panel, an introductory panel containing a thesis, headers that announce important sections in your project, and interpretive text that explains the evidence in each section. Use font size, color, and paper choices to help your reader navigate your project and grasp your main ideas.
- **Recommended Word Limit:** The Chicago Metro History Fair does not enforce a maximum word limit, but we do strongly encourage students to use words wisely and sparingly. In general, about 750-1,000 words will probably be most appropriate for most projects. The majority of these words will reflect your own ideas and interpretation, but others may be quotations by others that support your ideas.
- **Media:** Media devices (such as mp3 players, iPods, or monitors) are allowed in exhibits. They must not run for more than a total of three minutes and the viewer must be able to control the media device. Remember, media devices must fit inside the size limit.
- **Be sure to check the complete category rules!**

Why Should I Choose the Exhibit Category?

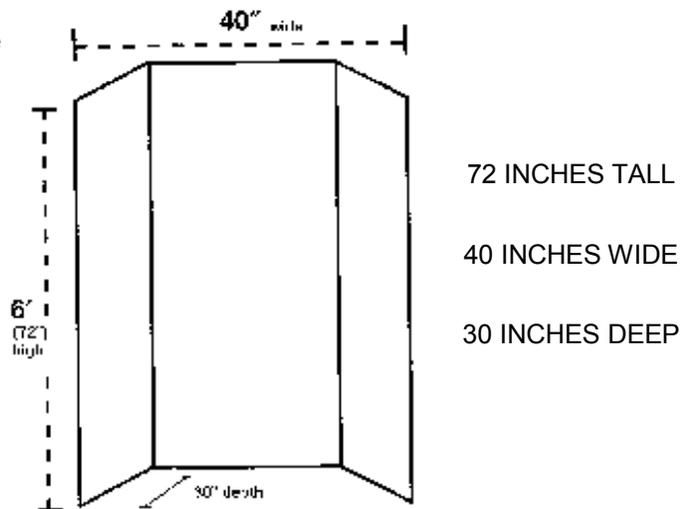
The exhibit category is great for people who enjoy working with their hands and physically building an argument. If you have ever gone to a museum and wondered how they put an exhibit together, now is your chance to give it a try. You should make sure that you have access to exhibit building supplies, including exhibit or poster board, construction paper, a printer, scissors, adhesives, etc. While many topics can be effectively conveyed using the exhibit category, this category is especially suitable for topics that have a variety of visual materials that can be used to support the argument, including photographs, illustrations, maps, graphs, newspaper articles, letters, etc.

Exhibit Rules

Like exhibits in history museums, History Fair exhibits present a visual and textual interpretation using a combination of student-composed text, quotations, and strong visuals. The project must strike a balance between substantive, brief interpretive text and the visual evidence needed to support the student's ideas.

- Exhibits are created by individuals or groups of no more than five students.
- Size limitations: 6 feet high x 40 inches wide x 30 inches deep. Measurement of the exhibit includes any materials you provide. So long as the exhibit fits within the required dimensions, it may be constructed in any shape. Circular or rotating exhibits or those meant to be viewed from all sides must be no more than 30 inches in diameter.
- Exhibits must be free standing.
- Media devices (e.g. DVD players, tablets, mp3 players, etc.) used in an exhibit must be limited to a total of no more than three minutes. Viewers and judges must be able to control media devices.

MAXIMUM DIMENSIONS FOR HISTORY FAIR EXHIBITS



- Students must provide a brief source credit on the exhibit board for displayed visuals/quotations/material (for example, "Jane Addams, 1908, Hull-House Museum"), with a full citation provided in the bibliography.
- The exhibit's student-composed word count must be provided on the Summary Statement. This includes the text that students write for titles, subheadings, labels, analytical/explanatory captions, graphs, timelines, media devices, or supplemental materials (e.g. photo albums, scrapbooks, etc.) where students use their own words. Brief source credits (see above) do not count. A date (January 1, 1903) counts as one word. Words such as "a," "the," and "of" should be counted. Each word in a name is counted individually. While the History Fair does not observe a formal word limit for exhibit, the program urges students to keep their interpretation concise. History Fair exhibits should not be a "book on a board." Consider using no more or less than 750-1,000 student-composed words.

IMPORTANT COMPETITION NOTES

Please bring three copies of the following materials to the contest:

- Summary Statement
- Annotated Bibliography, divided between primary and secondary sources (see "Rule for All Categories")

Written materials should be printed on plain white paper and stapled together (no binders). Place the written materials in front of the exhibit. Judges will ask to keep at least one copy of the project's written materials. Exhibit students should expect to be interviewed following judging.

Rules for All Categories

- Exhibits, documentaries, websites, and performances may be completed individually or by a group of 2-5 students. Papers are individual only. All students in a group must be involved in the research and creation of the project.
- Topics must connect with Chicago or Illinois history in order to advance to the state contest. Non-Illinois topics are permitted at the regional and finals competitions. Teachers often require integration of the National History Day theme, but the theme is not required by the Chicago Metro History Fair. Projects registered as “NHD eligible” will be assessed on how well their project integrates the NHD theme.
- Students may research, create, and enter only one project each year. Sharing research in multiple projects is not permitted. Revising or reusing an entry from a previous year may result in disqualification. Entries submitted for competition must be original and have been researched and developed in the current contest year.
- Students are responsible for the research, design, and creation of their own project, as well as operating their own equipment and materials. Students may receive advice from adults on the mechanical aspects of creating an entry and/or reasonable help necessary for safety, but the work must be completed by students. Feedback on the student’s work is permissible (help proofreading; suggestions or questions based on the student’s ideas, etc.). Materials created by others specifically for use in the entry violate this rule.
- Each project is required to have a Summary Statement and Annotated Bibliography.
- Word counts must be provided for exhibits, websites, and papers. Time lengths must be provided for documentaries and performances. [See *individual category rules for more specifics.*]
- Exhibits, performances, and documentaries will be judged and interviewed at the public competitions. Papers and websites are judged in a separate stream, which may have different deadlines for submission. Paper and website entrants will have an opportunity to share their projects at the competitions.
- Students should not prepare a formal, verbal presentation; however, they should plan to respond to questions posed by judges. The interviews are important to the History Fair experience, but the entry is judged on its merits alone.
- Plagiarism is unacceptable, and constitutes grounds for disqualification. [See www.plagiarism.org]
- Items potentially dangerous in any way—such as weapons, firearms, animals, etc.—are strictly prohibited.
- The Fair Use Doctrine allows students to use pre-existing materials (photos, footage, music, etc.) for educational purposes, including student productions like History Fair; therefore, students need not seek formal permissions within the context of the competition. However, if the project is shown in non-educational settings, then permissions should be sought as appropriate.
- Teachers may have additional rules/restrictions for the History Fair at individual schools. Students should comply with all rules set by their teacher.

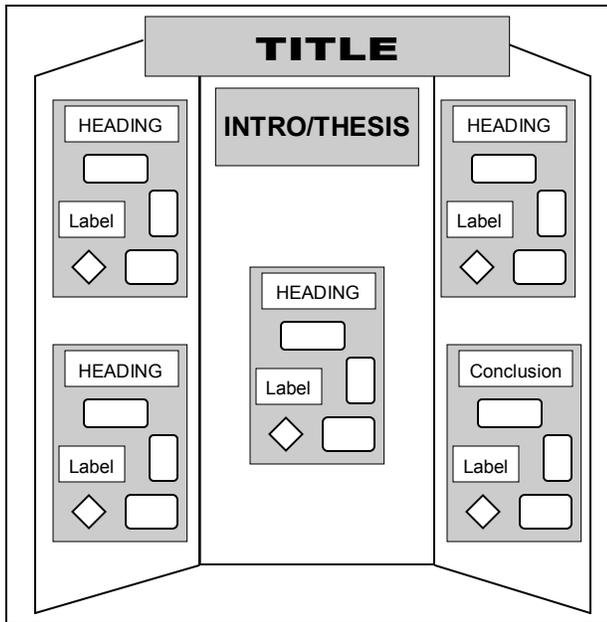
Required Materials

All projects must include an **Annotated Bibliography** and **Summary Statement**. In the bibliography, each source should be *annotated* with a short description of how the student used that source. The bibliography must be divided between *primary* sources (sources from the time period or written by someone with firsthand knowledge) and *secondary* sources (sources written after the time period, typically by a historian). Bibliographies must follow either the *Turabian* or *MLA* style format. Include all sources that contributed useful information, perspectives, or visuals, but not necessarily every source consulted. Annotations may describe why students placed the source as primary/secondary if it is not immediately obvious; and, in the case of web sources, may also describe who sponsors the site. Bundle photos or other materials from the same collection into a single citation. Cite oral history transcripts, questionnaires, or other supplementary materials in the bibliography—do not provide copies of them. Students must acknowledge all sources used in the development of the entry in the Annotated Bibliography in order to avoid plagiarism.

The [Summary Statement](#) provides the project’s thesis, a summary of the argument, and information about the development of the project. The form is available on the History Fair website. Except for websites, the Summary Statement and Annotated Bibliography should be printed on plain, white paper and stapled together. The Annotated Bibliography and Summary Statement are not included in the word count.

Exhibit Shapes and Sizes

Exhibits are designed to display visual and written information on a topic in an easy-to-understand and attractive manner. Exhibits are not simply collections of material. They are carefully designed to make an **argument** about your topic. To be successful, an exhibit must create an effective balance between visual interest and historical explanation. Moreover, they should have a logical flow. People reading the display should know where to begin and end, and in what order to read the text and view the evidence. Use of clearly -defined subheadings to guide the reader is highly encouraged.



Three-Panel Display

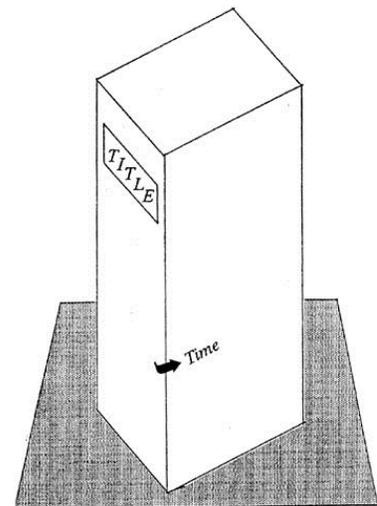
The most common form of an exhibit is a three-panel display, similar to the one on the left. This style is the least complicated to design and build, but is still a very effective way to present your information. Here are some tips for this style:

- Be sure your title is the main focus of the center panel.
- Use the center panel, or in some cases the top left panel, to present your introduction.
- Divide the exhibit into sections to give it an organizational structure that makes sense to the viewer.
- If your topic is presented chronologically, make sure the sequence works visually on the panels.
- You have a limited number of words; use them strategically and let the quotations, documents, artifacts, drawings, and photographs demonstrate your thesis.
- Artifacts or other materials may also be placed on the table between the side panels, but remember that they should be used only when they help to forward your argument in a meaningful way.

Three-Dimensional Exhibit

A three-dimensional exhibit is more complicated to construct, but can be especially effective for explaining topics where change over time is important. Since you have four main panels, it also works well for projects that have four natural sections. Like the three-panel display, one side should contain your title and introduction. As you move around the exhibit, the development of your topic can be explored. It is not necessary for the project itself to be able to spin. You may set it on a table (or the floor) so people can walk around it.

When making a three-dimensional exhibit, good organization is especially important. Because your exhibit has so many sides, viewers may be more easily confused about how to follow your exhibit's narrative. Make sure that each side is clearly labeled, clearly organized, and that there is a logical flow of ideas as the viewer moves about your exhibit.



This is just a start to the creative ways that History Fair students have expressed their arguments through exhibits. Think about ways to connect the content of your project with the look of your exhibit. The only limits are your imagination, the size requirement, and your ability to transport the project to a competition!

A Closer Look at History Fair Exhibits

A good design doesn't just jazz up your exhibit; it helps express your ideas. Can you guess what this exhibit is about without even reading the text? The cut-out of Rosie the Riveter lets the viewer immediately know the project's topic. The student took the theme a step further by using a red, white, and blue color scheme to convey the patriotic aspects of her topic.

History Fair isn't about glitz. The student has a simple, effective design for a project with a clear argument and solid research.



History Fair exhibits come in all shapes and sizes, but there are several common characteristics you can see in many good exhibits. Check out these exhibits from other students!

The thesis and main argument are very clear to the viewer in this project. The student used a larger font and a bold border to immediately attract your attention.

Photographs, newspapers, and sheet music are just a few of the primary sources that the student was able to incorporate into the project to support her argument.



The student arranged the exhibit into logical, well-organized sections with a wide variety of primary sources.



Even non-traditional formats must make an argument and use evidence. This project was about one student's immigrant ancestor's journey to their new lives in Chicago. To symbolize the project's connection to immigration, the students used an old suitcase as the frame for their exhibit.

Tips for Creating a Spectacular Exhibit

Planning

Getting Started

After your research, make an outline for your exhibit—just like you would before you write a paper. Make sure to include the main arguments and points that you would like to make in the exhibit. Using this outline, you'll be able to see what the main sections of your exhibit need to be in order to support your argument and convey it to the viewer.



Plan It Out

Plan out your exhibit with a simple sketch before you start to create the full-scale project. Do not touch a glue stick until you have a plan on paper!

Connect Content to Design

Let the topic of your project inspire the design of your exhibit. What visual cues can you send the viewer to convey symbolically the main message of your project? This can be as simple as using appropriate colors. A project about women's suffrage, for example, would be striking using purple and gold, colors commonly associated with the movement. Students have also created projects about conservation that looked like trees, projects about education that looked like school houses, and exhibits about suffrage that looked like a voting booth. No matter what you decide, remember that your project doesn't have to be fancy to be effective.

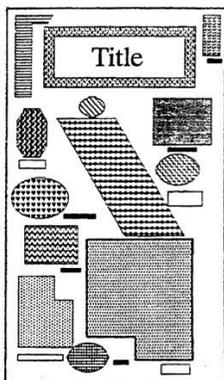
Divide and Conquer

Following the outline of your major argument and main points, lay out the other supporting evidence you have for your ideas. What sections do you need in the exhibit to tell the story and explain your argument persuasively? Background? Significance? Historical Context? Outcomes? Theme? Also, remember that exhibits rely on a visual argument as much as the text on the display. Which photographs, charts, maps, or other visuals provide the strongest support for your ideas? What primary source quotes enhance your argument? What areas might need more visual evidence to balance out the exhibit?

What's Your Point?

No matter what type of exhibit you decide to create, what topic you choose, or what division you are in, it is important to make sure that your argument (thesis) is clear **in the project itself**. Your argument should be the first thing the viewer looks at so they know right away what you are trying to prove in your exhibit. It should be concise and well-written. Usually students do this by making sure the argument is located where the viewers' eyes will look first, often in the center in a larger font.

Putting It All Together



A cluttered exhibit can leave your viewers feeling overwhelmed and unsure about the argument you are trying to make.

Avoid Clutter

It is always tempting to try to get as much on your exhibit panels as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. You don't have to put every single photo, drawing, and map that you found onto your exhibit. Try to select only the most important items for your project board. Clarity and organization are your primary goals. Everything should have a reason for being on your exhibit.

Content is More Important Than Glitz

Fancy exhibits are nice to look at and can be a lot of fun to create—but remember that your historical argument is the most important part of your exhibit.



Exhibit Text

Different types of exhibit text organize and explain your exhibit for your viewer. Carefully craft your text *before* you start working on your design choices. Your student-composed words present the interpretation of your topic to the viewer—they are important! Aim for about 750-1,000 student-composed words altogether.

The exhibit's **TITLE** should convey your core ideas and help spark interest in your exhibit and your argument. Which title draws your attention: "The Sanitary and Ship Canal" or "Facing Epidemic—Chicago Defeats Cholera through Sanitary Engineering"? Print your title in an extra large font that can be seen from a distance.

SUBHEADINGS identify the major sections of the exhibit and help the viewer understand how to navigate the display. History Fair exhibits usually have 4-6 different sections, each of which is introduced by a brief subheading.

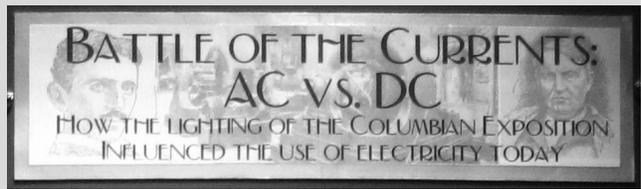
LABELS synthesize multiple pieces of historical evidence to present the historical interpretation for a particular section of an exhibit. There are three types of labels that are described in detail on the next page: *introductory* labels, *body* labels, and *concluding* labels. Perhaps the most important piece of the exhibit, labels communicate the exhibit's historical argument. Write and revise labels with care and make sure they are well-matched to their supporting historical evidence.

CAPTIONS are usually shorter and may analyze a single source. Avoid heavy use of captions that begin with "This is an image of..." Instead, focus on your ideas and argument and let the visuals stand as evidence for your claims.

CREDITS are brief and identify (as opposed to analyzing or explaining) the source of an image or quote (for example, "Jane Addams, 1908"). Credits are now required.

See the examples on the rights for more clarification.

Interested in learning more? Check out ["HF Project Guides: Exhibits"](http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org) at www.chicagohistoryfair.org



This **TITLE** panel uses a large font size to draw the viewer's attention to the core conflict the project will explore—the "fight" to see which electrical current would illuminate the Columbian Exposition. The second part of the title, in slightly smaller font, hints at the conflict's long-term historical significance by drawing the viewer's attention to the role that the Fair played in determining which form of electricity would become dominant.

The **SUBHEADINGS** for this exhibit contrasted the arguments for alternating current ("AC") against those for direct current ("DC") and detailed the role that the Columbian Exposition played in the debate:

- ✦ Alternating Current
- ✦ Direct Current
- ✦ Propaganda Against AC
- ✦ The World's Fair Comes to Chicago
- ✦ Bidding for Power
- ✦ The Triumph of AC
- ✦ Impacts of the Exposition

Under "Triumph of AC," the following **LABEL** text complements a facsimile version of an early printing of "America the Beautiful" and a nighttime photo of the gleaming Administration Building:

The lighting of the Columbian Exposition had a great impact not just on Chicago, but the entire world. The "White City" inspired Katharine Lee Bates to write a section of her famous song America the Beautiful: "Thine alabaster cities gleam," referring to the whitewashed and magnificently lit buildings at the Columbian Exposition. The lights at the fair may have even inspired Frank Baum, the author of the Wizard of Oz, for his ideas of the magical Emerald City. AC's triumph at the Columbian Exposition led to the idea of harnessing the tremendous power of Niagara Falls to light Buffalo, New York, with AC power.

Special thanks to Grace McGuire for these examples.

Labels

INTRODUCTORY labels set the stage for an exhibit, providing a road map for the viewer. Good introductions are typically about a paragraph in length (100 words or so) and contain a thesis, as well as a bit of historical context and significance. Print in larger, bolder font and mount the introduction on mat board or colored paper so the viewer can tell it is important. Most introductions are placed at the top, center of the exhibit (to catch the eye) or in the upper left corner of the exhibit (so that viewers can read from left to right, as they would in a book).

Labels within the **BODY** of the exhibit provide the interpretation for a certain section of the display. Most exhibits have 4-6 sections to help develop the story and each section may have 1-2 interpretive labels. Body labels are typically 50-75 words that are supported by 2-4 pieces of historical evidence drawn from primary and secondary sources. Labels may be supported by additional shorter *captions* that draw out specific points from individual pieces of evidence, if they are needed.

The **CONCLUDING** label wraps up the project's argument in about 100 words. Often focused on the topic's larger historical significance, the conclusion may summarize key changes over time or the legacies and lessons of historical events. The "book-end" to the introduction, you'll also want to draw attention to the conclusion through a larger font size and/or matting that draws the eye.



Credit

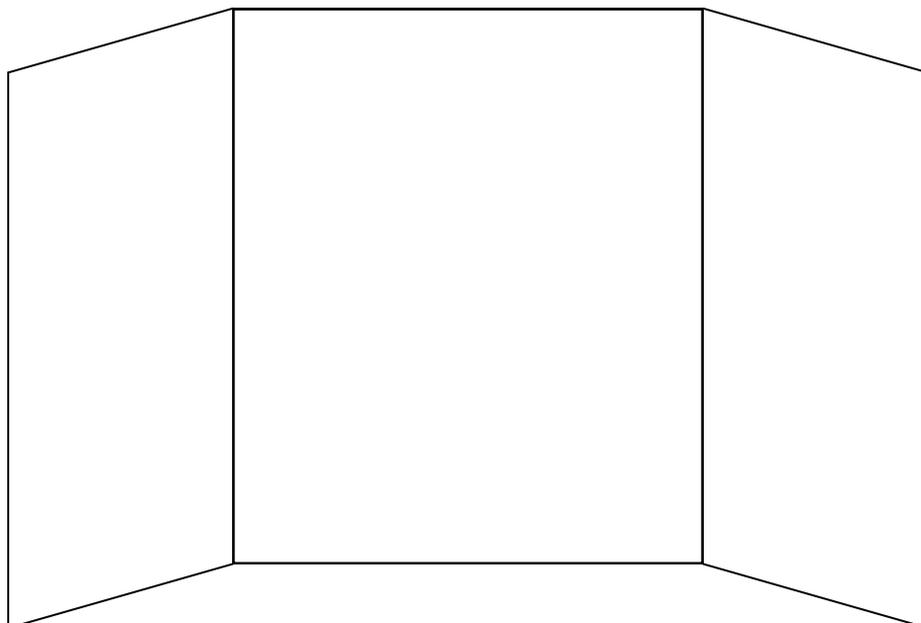
Font Size and Matting

You will want to put your title in the largest font on your exhibit and then scale the rest of your fonts down according to their importance. Big font = big ideas! Even for your smallest labels and captions, however, make sure to use a font that is easily readable from the vantage point of your viewer.

One way to make your labels stand out is to have the writing on a lightly colored piece of paper with a darker background or matting behind it. This can be done with construction paper, tag board, or mat board. Dark black lettering makes your labels easier to read. Photographs and written materials will also stand out more on backgrounds.

History Fair Exhibit Planning

Title:	
Thesis:	
Connection to Theme (Optional):	
Design and Color Ideas:	
Main ideas that support my thesis: <ul style="list-style-type: none">••••••	Main sections to organize my exhibit: <ul style="list-style-type: none">••••••
Possible illustrations to use:	



What are the Qualities of a Good Exhibit?

As you create your exhibit, go through this list and ask yourself if you've met all the criteria for a good History Fair project. Judges will use these criteria to evaluate your project.



Historical Knowledge—35% Junior Division (gr. 6-8); 30% Senior Division (gr. 9-12)

- My exhibit is historically accurate:** All the information in my project is true to the best of my knowledge.
- My exhibit demonstrates thorough, balanced, relevant knowledge:** I have made an effort to fully explain my topic and show different perspectives.
- I place my topic in historical context:** My topic didn't take place in isolation. I made sure to place my topic into historical context – the intellectual, political, social, and cultural setting for my topic.



Historical Analysis—25% Junior Division (gr. 6-8); 30% Senior Division (gr. 9-12)

- My project offers a historical interpretation/argument that is supported by evidence:** I present a thesis in my project and back it up with information drawn from my research.
- I have demonstrated historical significance and impact:** My project offers an answer to the “so what?” question. I explain why it is important to know about these events in history.
- I have shown change over time and cause and effect:** My exhibit offers an explanation of what things changed over time and why the changes took place.



Relation to National History Day Theme – *Optional*

The National History Day theme is optional in Illinois. If you choose to use the theme, it should be integrated into the analysis presented in your project. Consider using the theme in your thesis so that it is threaded throughout your project.



Sources—20%

- My project uses a depth and range of available primary sources:** I consulted a wide variety of sources from the time period for my project (newspaper accounts, diary entries, photographs, archival accounts, and other first-hand accounts).
- My project uses a depth and range of secondary sources:** I used accounts written by historians and other experts to understand the issues involved in my topic and their long-term significance.
- I make effective use of sources and quotes in my exhibit:** Sources are used as evidence for points made in my exhibit.



Clarity of Presentation—20%

- My exhibit tells a coherent, well-organized story:** I made sure my exhibit is well-organized, easy to understand, and interesting. My exhibit has a natural flow that makes sense to the viewer.
- I used the exhibit medium effectively:** My exhibit relies on visuals and concise interpretive text to tell the story. Sections are easily identifiable and move the story along. Words and images are easy to see and read.
- My exhibit and written materials show attention to detail and make an impact:** My words and quotes are carefully written and selected. I have proofread and edited my exhibit text, Summary Statement, and Annotated Bibliography.

Special thanks to Sarah Aschbrenner, National History Day in Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Historical Society for permission to adapt the Wisconsin NHD Category Guides. Original version: August 2009. Updated September 2014. Chicago Metro History Education Center.