

When you look at the 2016 National History Day theme and see three words, you might start to panic: How am I going to cover three big ideas in one project? Lucky for you, the answer is that you don't have to cover all these ideas. You will most likely focus on one of the three “E” words: exploration, encounter, or exchange. *The “E” word that rises to the surface in your topic will act in the starring role in your project.*

As you do more research and learn more about your topic, you will probably find that all three ideas are connected, so you should keep the other theme words in mind. You may be able to connect your topic to more than one. *Any other “E” words you look at will probably appear as supporting players in your project.*

DEFINITIONS

Let's take a look at the definitions of the theme words:

- **Exploration** is when someone goes out seeking something, and usually not by accident.
- **Encounter** is a coming together of two or more things, ideas, or people. Something happens because of an encounter.
- **Exchange** is to give and receive. An exchange could include intangible items, such as ideas, or physical items such as people, money, or objects.

These “E” words are all actions. The result of those actions is a connection of people, places, or ideas. Exploration leads to encounter, which can lead to exchange. An encounter can inspire exploration.

FINDING A THEME CONNECTION

A single topic could have many different theme connections, depending on which “E” you choose to make your point about impact on history. For example, look at the Freedom Riders. In 1961, civil rights activists rode interstate buses into the South to challenge segregation on public transportation. Depending on which “E” word is in the starring role, your theme connection or thesis is going to change.

- **Exploration:** Civil rights activists explored a new type of resistance to segregation laws.
- **Encounter:** Civil rights activists deliberately encountered segregation so they could protest it.
- **Exchange:** The exchange between activists and Southern segregationists helped to boost the mission of the Civil Rights Movement.

In each of the examples above, we highlight the connection to only one “E” word, but there is more to consider as you take a deeper look. As you're explaining the significance of the Freedom Riders encounter in history, you will find that their success led to more exchanges between activists and segregationists. *The key is not to force connections between the three “E” words, but to pay attention to the ways they might be connected in a topic's historical context and impact. If your topic is strongly connected to more than one “E” word, you should discuss it in your project.*

PICKING A TOPIC

When you choose a topic, your mind might immediately think of geographic explorations, such as Lewis and Clark, or important encounters of two groups of people, such as the Powhatan encountering the English in Jamestown. These are good topics, but remember that explorations, encounters, and exchanges have happened in all corners of the world, for hundreds of years.

To pick a successful History Day topic, you should first consider an area of history that is interesting to you. Then try to look at that topic through a lens of exploration, encounter, or exchange to find a topic. Thinking first about an area of history and then looking for topics connected to theme will let you be creative, rather than just picking something that you have learned about many times before.

Need help picking a topic? Visit the library, talk to a teacher, or visit the Minnesota History Day website!
education.mnhs.org/historyday/