

Crafting a Strong Historical Argument

History Day projects should do more than just tell a story. Every project should **make a point** about its topic. To do this, you will need to develop your own **historical argument or thesis statement** about the historical impact of the person, event, or idea you are studying. This is not the same as a topic. Your thesis statement expresses your opinion about the impact and significance of your topic. Researchers start out with a topic and a research question, but they usually don't have an argument right away. Instead, they develop their thesis over time as they learn more about their topic and make judgments about the evidence they find.

A good thesis statement does **three** things:

- **Addresses a narrow topic**
- **Expresses a well-informed opinion based on evidence (sources)**
- **Evaluates significance ("So what?")**

For a demonstration, check out the building of the thesis statement below:

Step 1: "The Great Chicago Fire."

- This is not a thesis statement yet because it doesn't address a specific, narrow issue. What will the project examine? How the fire started? The emergency response? Cows? There are thousands of topics that a historian could research. This topic needs to be narrowed quite a bit before it can be used to build a thesis.

Step 2: "The Great Chicago Fire and Chicago Architecture."

- We are making progress because this begins to narrow the topic, but it's still not a thesis. This phrase expresses no opinion and makes no argument about the significance of the fire and Chicago's architecture.

Step 3: "Because of the Great Chicago Fire, many people in Chicago rebuilt their wooden homes and businesses with masonry and terra cotta construction."

- This sentence is close to a thesis statement, but it isn't quite there yet. The researcher now shows an interpretation ("because") about the impact of the fire on building materials, but still doesn't tell us why the topic is significant in history. What effects did this change of building materials have? How did this change affect individuals and businesses in Chicago?

Step 4: "Because of the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, many people in Chicago rebuilt their wooden homes and businesses with masonry and terra cotta construction. This rebuilding process eventually led to a distinctive 'Chicago Style' of architecture which influenced buildings and shaped skylines around the world."

- We have a winner! This thesis looks at a narrow topic, expresses an opinion, and evaluates the significance of the topic. A project based on this thesis statement would discuss the new building processes and demonstrate their impact on buildings around the world.

Thesis	Strong	Weak	Reasons
Richard J. Daley died in 1976.			
Artists of Chicago: 1890-1990			
The Juvenile Court system was established to remove children from the adult criminal justice system and help youth reform, but over the years it became a source of punishment and imprisonment.			
Pesticides kill thousands of farmworkers and must be stopped.			
German immigrants in Chicago had enormous difficulties during World War One as they were forced to choose between being "German and an enemy" or forsaking Germany to be "American".			
Before Title IX, there were few female basketball players.			
How did <i>The Jungle</i> make an impact on the foods we eat?			
The reversal of the Chicago River, which improved sanitary and health conditions of Chicagoans, demonstrated that science, technology, cannot solve problems unless there is economic motives and political will.			

Rewrite one of the weak statements to make it stronger: