

# National History Day 2009 Theme: The Individual in History: Actions and Legacies

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National History Day in Minnesota



The 2009 History Day theme, “The Individual in History: Actions and Legacies,” is rich with possibility. Countless individuals have had some sort of impact on history, and thus there seems to be an endless array of topics that connect to the theme.

The postscript “Actions and Legacies,” however, is the key to this year’s theme. It would be relatively easy to develop a project that simply tells an individual’s life story. But the theme is not “Biographies of Individuals.” This year’s theme asks students to go beyond the biography by analyzing how the actions of the individual impacted the world we live in, thus leaving behind a legacy of change. The primary question students should ask as they consider their topics is: How did my individual act in a way that caused change or made an impact?

There are several approaches to choosing an appropriate topic. If students already have an individual in mind, they must research the reason for that individual’s place in the history books and determine the starting point of the individual’s involvement, the crucial moment or turning point, and the legacy left behind. If students have a particular area of interest, such as women’s rights, they should research that interest and find a list of influential individuals. If students want to focus on a group of individuals, one of many who worked to achieve change, they should research the change itself and the ways that members of the group were involved. Examples for each are as follows:

*Individual:* Malcolm X. His birth date, family situation, and early years in prison are not the core of this topic. Students should instead consider focusing on how Malcolm X’s beliefs about the Civil Rights Movement led to the rise of black nationalism.

- What were those beliefs about the way blacks should fight for Civil Rights?
- Were they different from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s beliefs? How were they similar?
- How did he display and spread those beliefs?
- What was black nationalism, and how did Malcolm X contribute to its rise?

*Area of Interest:* Women’s rights. As there are many women’s rights, students need to further narrow to a particular right, such as voting. The women’s suffrage movement in the United States alone spans 80 years and involves many people. If students search for a list of people involved, they may discover Alice Paul.

- When did Alice Paul become involved in the suffrage movement and why?
- What was the status of the suffrage movement when she entered the picture?
- What actions did Alice Paul take? How were those different from her predecessors?
- Did her actions affect change? Why was her role important to the movement?

*One of a Group:* Soldiers in the Revolutionary War. Since the Revolutionary War spanned eight years, narrowing to one battle will help. At Lexington and Concord, colonial minutemen and British soldiers fought for very different reasons, and after the battle, a new war had begun.

- What immediate events led up to the Battle of Lexington and Concord?
- Who were the minutemen? Why were they fighting?
- Who were the British soldiers? Why were they fighting?
- How did each group of soldiers contribute to the battle and the eventual war?

No matter which individual or group of individuals students choose to study, the ideas of change and impact need to be more important than a bulleted list of biographical information. History Day projects for 2009 should not read like obituaries. Instead, imagine that an individual’s life is mapped out in a massive timeline that is hanging on a wall in a dark room. Take a flashlight and illuminate one small section of the timeline; that is the focus of “The Individual in History.”

For more information on this year’s theme click [here!](#)