

Creating a History Day Exhibit

Adapted from materials at the National History Day website

Exhibits are designed to display visual and written information on topics in an attractive and understandable manner. They are similar to exhibits found in a museum. People walking by should be attracted to an exhibit's main idea and, therefore, stop to learn more about the topic. To be successful, an exhibit must create an effective balance between visual interest and historical explanation.

The most common form of exhibit entry is a three-panel display. This style is the least complicated to design and build but is still a very effective way to present information.

Here are some tips for this style:

- Be sure the title is the main focus of the center panel.
- Use the center panel to present the main ideas.
- Use side panels to compare issues about the topic or to explain related details.
- Artifacts or other materials may also be placed on the table between the side panels.

Labeling

The labels used for the title and main ideas are very important because they direct the viewer's eye around the exhibit. One way to make labels stand out is to have the writing on a light-colored piece of paper with a darker background behind it. This can be done with construction paper, tag board, or mat board. Dark, black lettering makes labels easier to read. Also be sure to use an appropriately sized font.

Photographs and written materials will also stand out more if they are placed on backgrounds.

Exhibit Design

Although students will be able to explain their exhibits during the initial judging, a successful exhibit must be able to explain itself. This makes it important to design an exhibit so that the photographs, written materials, and illustrations are easy to understand.

It is always tempting to put as much onto the panel boards as possible, but this usually makes for a cluttered and confusing display. Students should try to select only the most important items for their exhibit boards. Clarity and organization are the most important goals for an exhibit.

Exhibit Design Guidelines

Three hand-outs illustrate the importance of design in the creation of a National History Day exhibit:

- **"Features of Exhibit Design"** addresses the details of exhibit design.
- **"Basic Elements of an Exhibit"** addresses the three most important design elements.
- **"Levels of Text"** demonstrates the importance of titles and font size in clear exhibit design.

Three-Dimensional Exhibits

A three-dimensional exhibit is more complicated to construct but can be especially effective in explaining themes in which change over time is important. As in the three-panel display, one side should contain the title and main idea. As viewers move around the exhibit the development of the topic can be explored. It is not necessary for the exhibit itself to be able to spin. It may be set on a table (or on the floor) so that people can walk around it.

Features of Exhibit Design

An effective exhibit incorporates the following four features:

Simplicity

Emphasis

Unity

Balance

Simplicity is clearness and lack of complication. It is the use of only a few colors or black and white; the use of only 1 or 2 basic shapes and sizes; the use of simple organization of your materials. It is clearness and economy in selection of the idea or ideas to be "sold." If an attempt is made to sell too much at one time, nothing will be sold. Stick to one or two ideas. Simplicity is the key to an effective display. This is why National History Day requires the students to present their ideas within 500 words. Making an exhibit using simplicity requires clarity and effective wording.

Emphasis is the stress or prominence given to an idea or design element. It is making one idea, color, shape, or texture dominant and others subordinate. If all elements are of equal interest, no single one receives attention. Emphasize an element by making it brighter, larger, more textured, surrounded by empty space, point to it with lines, or make it project from the background. A center of interest must be chosen. Showcase the thesis of your exhibit and create a travel line for the viewers eye to follow. Emphasis clarifies how your topic fits the theme and answers the question "so what?" In other words, what is the historical significance of this topic? Why is it important? What happened because of it, and what if it had never happened?

Unity is singleness of effect or style, related style, or totality of related parts. In creating exhibits, unity is a simple matter of repetition and consistency. It is overlapping of identical shapes, the use of any shape, color, line, or texture with a repeat of it elsewhere in the display. It is consistency in lettering also. Each element in the design should mesh with each other so that a single effect is achieved. Creating unity in your exhibit will help with all of the other elements, simplicity, emphasis and balance.

Balance is the "weight force" or influence countering the effect of another element in the display. The challenge in creating a display is determining the visual weight of various design elements. Some colors and textures "weigh" more than others. Elements can be divided equally to create formal balance or informal balance. An informal balance is created by emphasizing arrangement rather than actual weight. Balance is something that really has to be seen. Remember: just as you have balance in your research your presentation should have balance. When you look at your exhibit, are your eyes drawn only to one panel? If so your exhibit is probably not in balance.

In addition the four basics described above, advanced exhibit designs consider these elements: color, line, shape, texture, and space. Remember however, that while appearance is an integral part of your display, content is the most important aspect of any exhibit.

Color represents emotion and allows objects to stand out from the background. When the primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—are arranged with the secondary colors between them, this is known as a color wheel. A designer's choice of color combinations can greatly influence the character of a display. Complimentary colors (opposite on the color wheel) create a sense of excitement and action, which is most useful in display work. When placed side by side, they intensify each other, but are seldom used in equal amounts. The most pleasing color schemes are those that combine families of colors—those that are near each other on the color wheel. Colors can advance and recede and have certain psychological connotations. For example, red suggests danger and passion (blood), blue suggests tranquility (sky), and green suggests nature (leaves). These connotations are not ironclad, but can often be counted on to contribute additional emotional layers to a display.

Tips on using color in exhibits:

- Limit display to black and white (or beige) and one intense color.
- Use strong contrasts; black backgrounds provide an automatic contrast.
- Use dark accents on a light background, and light accents on a dark one.
- Remember good design is simple and using many colors will add clutter.

Lines represent order and give the eye explicit directions about where to look and how to interpret what it sees. They group related objects together and divide unrelated objects. Most often lines are functional rather than decorative.

Tips on using lines:

- Decide which part of your display is the most important, and direct attention to it by judicious use of lines.
- Do not scatter lines about at random.
- Remember that margins are an invisible line.
- Attention to line does not mean that all elements in the design have to be lined up.

Shape is any type of form used in a display, remembering that the display case or bulletin board itself is a shape. The main problem is to arrange all of the different sizes and shaped items into larger and more important shapes, and then to relate them to the rest of the design.

Tips on using shapes:

- If you use background shapes, keep them simple and large.
- Use as few shapes as possible and don't use 2 or 3 shapes where 1 large one will do.
- Do not mix shapes too much.
- Try to limit the number of different shapes and sizes used.

Texture is the visual or tactile appearance of a surface. Surfaces can look or feel smooth, rough, soft, cool, or warm. They can look pleasant or unpleasant, which can have a dramatic effect on a display.

Tips on using texture:

Use smooth board against a textured fabric.

Natural fabrics are especially good for backgrounds because they have a recognition factor (we know how they feel).

Matt and shiny finishes also add texture.

Space is depth and dimension--objects that are in front of or behind things, around them, or projecting from them. Space adds interest, excitement, and contrast to your design.

Tips on using space:

A small item can be projected by attaching it to a small cardboard piece to give it a 3-D effect.

Any shape that overlaps another seems to be in front of it. Warm colors seem to be in front of cool ones.

Anything which adds depth or the appearance of depth will enhance the display.

Basic Elements of an Exhibit

Orientation

Make sure the title and subtitle of the exhibit are prominent features of the design.

Make the main idea or thesis clear to the viewer.

Segmentation

Organize the exhibit into subtopics.

Use design elements to make subtopics clear to viewer.

Explanation

Use clear and concise captions and text to identify pictures, objects, or documents, or other information for the viewer.

Explain and support your thesis and demonstrate connections to the History Day theme.

Levels of Text

The **main title** introduces the topic and attracts viewer interest:

A TOWN BUILT ON IRON

The **subtitle** focuses the topic and limits what the project will interpret:

***"The Evolution of
Hibbing, Minnesota,
1880 - 1980"***

A **subject label** breaks down the topic into smaller parts for explanation and organization. These labels guide the viewer around the display:

Moving the Town

Captions are the most detailed label and provide the opportunity for interpretation. These should be short, active, and clear:

The original town site of Hibbing was located over a rich lode of iron ore. Because the ore was more valuable than the town, the buildings of Hibbing were moved to a new site in 1919.

Drafting the Exhibit

I. STEP ONE: Write an outline of your major topic and sub-topics.

- A. Write your general topic as a title.
 - Suggestion: Write your thesis as a sub-title.
 - Suggestion: Try to tie in the theme here, if possible.
- B. Background (historical context for your topic)
 - 1. related events occurring before your topic
 - 2. events causing or influencing the development of the topic
- C. Evidence that proves or analyzes your thesis (There may be many. Your goal is to divide them into logical sub-topics)
 - 1. sub-topic one
 - 2. sub-topic two
 - 3. sub-topic three
 - 4. sub-topic four
 - 5. sub-topic five more are possible...
- D. The results, consequences, effects of your topic -this is another possible connection to the theme

II. STEP TWO: Make a sketch of your proposed project.

- A. Use the outlined topic headings to plan the exhibit's orientation and segmentation.
- B. Use a large sheet of paper to make a sketch of your finished exhibit. See sample on reverse.
- C. Draw boxes to show where text and graphics will be.

Consider what materials you have obtained that explain the topic and sub-topics.

- 1. photos, graphs, charts, maps, other graphics
- 2. primary source text
- 3. your analysis and explanations (500 word limit)

Hint: The materials you choose should influence your overall design.

III. STEP THREE: Make a key for your sketch.

A. Label the boxes on your sketch. Use letters for text and numbers for graphics. (*See example.*)

B. On a separate sheet of lined paper, write the exact text that you will use on your project. Label this text with the corresponding letter from your sketch.

C. Write a short description of your graphics. Label this description with the corresponding number from your sketch.