

Unit 4: The Theme

The Annual History Day Theme

Each year National History Day selects a theme. When participating in history day, students will need to choose a topic related to that theme. In fact, one of the important components of a history day project is the student's ability to **relate** their topic to the theme. The annual theme frames the research for both students and teachers. It is intentionally broad enough that students can select topics from any place (local, national, or world) and any time period in history. Once students choose their topics, they investigate historical context, historical significance, and the topic's relationship to the theme by researching in libraries, archives, and museums; through oral history interviews; and by visiting historical sites. Remember: History Day projects aren't just reports with dates and facts; they are studies of a topic's **significance** and **importance** in history.

2026: Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History

This year's theme invites students to explore topics that consider and explore one or more of these historical phenomena. While students do not have to address all three in their work, it's important to be aware that one often interacts with the other and thus will need to be considered. As is always the case with History Day themes, this year's is broad and, as such, requires the student to consider first the terms themselves. Consulting the Oxford English Dictionary here's what we find:

Revolution – “Alteration, change; upheaval; reversal of fortune” (II.7.a) and “Overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it; forcible substitution of a new form of government.” (II.7.b)

Both definitions offer interesting possibilities for History Day topics. Fundamental change can be revolutionary, can't it? The first definition isn't restricted to any one field and we know that many areas of history, not just political, have experienced revolutions/revolutionary change.

The second definition focuses on what we traditionally think of when we see the word “revolution” – political revolution. This year's theme is directly tied to the America 250 celebration and so when you review the theme book you'll see an entire discussion of the American Revolution.

Reaction – “The influence which a thing, acted upon or affected by another, exerts in return on or upon its source” (1.a). Also, “A movement towards the reversal of an existing tendency or set of circumstances” (4.a).

Here we understand that often history is driven by reactions to events or circumstances. In the student guide we consider Magna Carta as a topic in our topic funnel. The charter was the result of a reaction to royal overreach on the part of King John of England (1199-1216). Reacting to his abuse of power, the barons rebelled. Magna Carta (The Great Charter) cemented the peace between the King and his barons. That document (in the long run) was revolutionary because it placed the King under the rule of law. So, in this case, a revolution grows out of a reaction to abuse (much akin to the American Revolution).

Reform – “The action or process of making changes in an institution, organization or aspect of social or political life, so as to remove errors, abuses, or other hindrances to proper performance.” (1.a)

History is replete with reform movements. Movements of change to improve institutions and bodies. Can reform movements foster revolutionary change? Absolutely

You will want to discuss the terms with your students first. This theme has a lot to ‘unpack’ so take some time to work through it with your students. You can download the 2026 Theme book and theme narrative at the [NHDGeorgia website](#). While there check out the 2026 Theme video as well!

Strategies for discussing the theme with your students

1. Begin with definitions - Find out what the terms mean. Start with a dictionary. Discuss.
2. Work through the vocabulary found in the narrative (word mapping, vocabulary triangles, examples) - make certain students are comfortable with the vocabulary in the text itself.
3. When reading the theme narrative - highlight the different questions/points in the text.
4. Annotate the theme narrative, including questions students come up with as they read it.
5. Use the materials found in the Student Guide to support and assist your discussion.

Resources you might use in your classroom to introduce the theme

The National Archives “DocsTeach” program includes a dedicated website with sources and activities that deal specifically with this year’s theme. [“A Revolution, a Reaction, and a Reform: Getting Ready for National History Day”](#)

The broad nature of the theme allows students to select topics in areas that interest them. Because it’s a theme NHD has used numerous times before, there are lots of finding aids and guides available online. For instance, students interested in the

United States Civil War check out ["Using National History Day to Explore the Civil War."](#) Written by Beth Twiss Houting (2011), the essay explores ways in which students can direct their Civil War interests into NHD and turn them into projects. Though it was written for the 2011-2012 program year the basic points Houting makes remain relevant.

Look for updated versions of much of this material to appear online during the fall term.