National History Day 2012
Building a Thesis

Erin Burns
Reference Librarian
Penn State Wilkes-Barre
A Good thesis starts with a good question!
Thesis?

What is a thesis?
- Controlling idea that constructs the rest of the project
- In a history paper/project, the thesis generally explains why or how something happened.
- Every sentence of the paper/project should support your thesis.
  - Information that is NOT directly related to the thesis will appear irrelevant.
- With a weak or no thesis, much of the paper will appear to be irrelevant and unguided.

http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/thesis.htm
A good historical thesis:

- Takes a stand by making a point which will be backed up by evidence
- Has a narrow and specific focus
- Expresses one main idea
- Tells the viewer why the subject is historically significant, and often suggests change over time
- Is presented as a statement, not a topic or question
- Is historical, not a statement about current events
But how?

You must start with a CLEAR QUESTION.

- A thesis which does not answer a question, or answers a simple or obvious question, is not a thesis.
- Ask thoughtful questions of the topic and primary source material to develop a good thesis.
- The best theses are good precisely because the questions they answer are significant, complex, and original.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_LFIHp-61I
Developing a Thesis
Build from the topic
Thesis = Topic + Theme + Impact(Significance)
Possible Topics for NHD 2012

- Jazz: Revolution in Music
- Germ Theory: Revolution in Medicine
- LBJ and the Great Society
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Revolution of the Domestic Woman
- Martha Graham: Mother of Modern Dance
- Hawks and Doves: American Reaction to the Vietnam War
- Canals and Railroads: 19th C Transportation Revolution
- Sit-ins and Freedom Rides: Reformers in Action
- Sewer Systems: Revolution in Sanitation
- Steve Jobs and the Personal Computer Revolution
- Reconstruction: A Failed Revolution
Developing a Thesis

- Example:
  Jazz and Music Revolution
- Develop question(s) around the topic
  - Who
  - What
  - Where
  - When
  - Why
  - How
Developing a Thesis

- This only helps to begin to “probe” the topic
- Gives a direction for research
- Many questions that could be asked of the general topic
- Which ones are the most interesting? Which ones are possible to research/explore?
Developing a Thesis

- Develop a unique perspective on the topic
  - Jazz music revolutionized music because it was one of the first forms of African-American music to cross into “mainstream” white America.
Developing a Thesis

- Concessive Clause
  - Although..., this....
- Main Clause
  - Subject of the project
  - Do NOT use “I”
- Include a because clause
  - Force summary
Example Exercise

Finish the sentence for each of the following:

- Hypothesis
  - Dear Reader, I want to convince you that...

- Summary of evidence and logic
  - The reasons you should believe me are...

- Context and Conclusion (historical significance)
  - You should care because....
Example Exercise

Writing a Thesis Statement

Thesis Activity

Avoiding Thesis Pitfalls
The introduction sets the stage by telling the viewer what to expect from the project. The thesis statement should be readily apparent, but should be anchored to the larger picture the historian is trying to create rather than hanging alone. In the introduction to an exhibit on the riot of 1919, below, notice the following elements at work:

- shows cause and effect; change over time
- claims significance or impact
- situates in context
- makes a specific argument (the thesis)

Circle and label each element you find

“The race riot of 1919 was a cataclysmic event in Chicago. After five days of rioting, 38 white and black citizens were killed and 537 were injured. The riot itself was the product of nearly two decades of conflict between whites and blacks over housing, jobs, and political representation. Before the riot, the black community was pressed into separate areas of the city by informal and extralegal means. After the riot the means of enforcing segregation became more accepted, more formal, often more violent, and completely legal. In this way the riot of 1919 was a turning point for the city Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "most segregated in the nation."”

More examples

Teaching History
http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/22206

AP US History Thesis Activity
A Good thesis is a Work in Progress

While researching, ask:
- Is my hypothesis really true?
- What evidence at my disposal makes it false?
- How can I modify my hypothesis to make it true?

Develop a new, more complex hypothesis by modifying the old one. There usually is no need to start from scratch; simply alter what you started with.
Tips for writing a good Thesis

- This is the hardest part of the paper, do not expect it to come easily.
- After thesis is developed
  - Read through it again
  - Search for vague words and phrases
  - Underline such phrases
  - Re-word them to be more specific

In every un-refined thesis, there is a word or phrase which remains unclear or unexplained. Find it and "unpack" it in your introductory paragraph.
Thesis comes from the Sources

- It is impossible to develop a good thesis without already having begun to analyze the primary/secondary sources which supply the evidence.
- How can you know what is even possible to argue if you haven't looked closely at your data/research?
Investigate those Sources

- Helps them to look at the material critically
- This is why they do an Annotated Bibliography
  - Need to tell why they used it
  - What made it a good or bad source
  - If the evidence in this source was different than somewhere else
- Cop-out
  - This source is good because...

Try instead answering the questions above, and also the who, what, where, when, why, and how in the ANNOTATION....
Drafting with a Thesis

- Start with a tentative thesis paragraph
- Draft the rest of the Paper/Project
- Go back and re-write the thesis paragraph
  - Much better sense of what was just argued
  - Easier to come up with a better thesis
- Go back over the body and see if it supports this complex thesis.
- Good writing = continually evaluation of your work

The thesis is not the starting point of your exploration, but the result of it.
Discussion
Sources for building a Thesis

http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/

http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org

http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/writing-the-paper/thesis-statements


http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/1/

http://www.arts.cornell.edu/prh3/257/classmats/papertip.html
Teaching with Primary Sources (via the Library of Congress)
Montana’s NHD Teacher Toolkit
http://www.msubillings.edu/historyday/teachers//MTNHD%20Teachers%20Toolkit.pdf
PSU Wilkes-Barre Library’s NHD resources
http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/wilkesbarre/nhd.html