Introduce NHD:
1st week of school—
Tell the students they’ll participate in National History Day
Suggest they check out the NHD website
Tell them the categories & the theme for the year
Suggest they start thinking about:
  the kind of the project they’d like to do
  who they’d like to work with (up to five)
  the kinds of history they’re interested

Tell Them Why They’re Doing NHD:
Usually the week before Thanksgiving, I go into more depth on NHD, show them samples of former projects, and tell them it’s such a great project, because they
can choose their own topics
can work with their friends if they want to
learn great research skills
figure out how to organize and present what they’ve learned
learn to write a great thesis
and...
if they’re competitive, they can win fabulous prizes
  get a good college letter of rec letter from me
  impress college admissions’ officers
  win cash prizes, college scholarships
  (mention special prizes here)
  obtain priceless psychic rewards

Picking a Topic/Group/Category:
The first thing that’s due is their proposals:
  their topics
  who (if anyone) they’re working with
    (full name, teacher, class period)
  what type of project they’re doing
    (paper, documentary, exhibit, website, or performance).

How to Narrow a Topic:
I take about a week to grade their proposals, list their proposed topics (for both the librarian and me) then I try talking to kids if I see any problems. I like going over their topics in a class setting, so other kids can see the students and me modeling the process of narrowing down their topic.

For example, invariably, some kid will write down the Vietnam War as a topic, which, of course, is much too broad. Then I’ll bring up the theme. This year, it’s Turning Points in History: People, Ideas, Events, so I’ll try eliciting from the class what a turning point in history might be for that topic. Since the students pick their topics before we’ve finished the book (always a problem!), I would try to do this exercise with a kid who’s chosen a topic we haven’t studied yet, so the Vietnam War works well. I’d try
to find out what exactly interests them about the Vietnam War (usually it’s hippies), but then, I’d try to lead the discussion around to turning points in the war, such as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (which gave LBJ almost unlimited executive power to wage the war), the Fulbright Senate hearings (which changed Congressional opinion), or the TET Offensive (which changed American public opinion about the war). Of course, there are lots of others, but those are just some obvious ones. Were there other, less obvious ones? The 1968 Democratic Convention? The draft lottery? The Weathermen? Kent State? Are they interested in the topic because their grandfather fought in the war? What was his experience? If students have any primary sources others don’t have because of their families, could they use those in some way?

Then we’d talk about the people: LBJ (others?), William Fulbright, etc.; ideas: (executive power in waging war v. Congressional authority; domino theory, etc.), or events (the Gulf of Tonkin “attack,” etc.).

By modeling how to narrow a topic, this helps shows students how they can all narrow their topics.

How to Find Books:

I’ll project the Amazon.com website and show them how to look for books. Most kids are terrible at this. I call them Googleheads. They’ll stick in a super-narrow term, and if an exact title doesn’t immediately pop up, they assume there’s nothing written on their topic. The advantage to Amazon, is that it’s possible to find great books and not exactly know what you’re looking for.

Say I was still working with the kid above, and he’d narrowed his topic to the TET Offensive. I’d put that term into the search, and see what popped up. Then we’d look at the book. Who wrote it? A professor, a journalist, or a conspiracy theorist? I urge them to get at least one scholarly book on their topic and read it all the way through. I literally watch them read in class, and give them credit for sitting quietly, reading, and taking notes (more on that later).

Then I show them the feature that says, people who bought this, also bought this. Usually it’s very helpful (but not always). I tell them that’s why it’s called re-search, because if they find what they’re looking for right away, their topic is probably too broad

I try to get them to write down or print a list of possible books they want to look for when we’re at the library.

How to Physically Find Books:

Then we start research, and I give them research grades. I’ve developed a great relationship with the Boulder Public Library (BPL), which does a better job of working with my students than our own school library (sad but true). You can see the BPL website on their webpage. We have a modified block schedule, so on our block day, we take the RTD bus to the library, and usually 3-6 librarians work with our students. Before our field trip, I try to make sure each student has an up to date library card and has all their fines paid so they can check out books. The students don’t know how to look up books or find them on the shelves. They also don’t understand that books are grouped with similar books, so it’s worth their while to look at the books surrounding the book they think they want. They need to physically open the books, look at the Table of Contents, look at the Index, and see if there’s something they could use in that book.

I have to make clear that it’s not cheating if they don’t read a book cover to cover. It’s ok to scrim, which I have to teach them how to do.

I tell them if they’ve checked out an academic book, the introduction summarizes the entire book and provides the main argument, so sometimes, that’s all they need.
**How to Take Notes:**

After they’ve checked some books out, I have a day where they bring their books to class and I show them different ways of taking notes. I used to require 400 note cards, but I stopped doing that after realizing I was getting about 350 crap cards. I still provide note cards as one option for recording their research, although fewer and fewer students use them.

I’ve stolen Maureen Aumann’s notecard system.
(She used to teach in Cherry Creek, but she’s probably retired by now.)

She taught there are three kinds of note cards:

1. **bibliography cards**
   - (all the info you need to cite a book, give that book a #).

2. **quote cards**
   - (these come in extra hand for exhibits; they also have a source number in the upper right hand corner and a page number in the lower left hand corner. I make all my students write down this info, in case they have to write a paper or their groups explode, which always happens).

3. **information cards**
   - (these also have a source # and page#, and they must be written in outline form, in phrases, with everything spelled correctly).

If this system doesn’t work for them, there are computer notecard programs they can use (Notecard), and if the kids are really smart, they can try using something sophisticated like Zotero (although I don’t get many kids who take me up on that). What they can’t do is write page after page of notes, put sticky flags on page numbers, or print enormous amounts of crap off the internet. Like I said, as long as they create a system that works for them and allows them to keep track of their information and sources, I can be somewhat flexible.

**How to Do Research:**

I tell them I expect a minimum of twenty hours of outside research, and if they want to win, there’s no limit to the amount of research they should do. That’s why so few kids win.

Quality of research matters as well as quantity. I talk about problems the kids might be having in class, or privately. (This step is very ad hoc, depending on the kids and their projects.)

**How to do a Bibliography:**

The next thing that’s due is a five-source annotated bibliography, separated into primary and secondary sources. I talk about the difference between the two, and make sure everybody gets it. They need to have at least one primary source. At this stage, all the sources **must** be books (no internet sources yet). I have to teach how to write bibliographies (alphabetical order by first word, etc.) , and I also pass around former student’s bibliographies to look at. I require **Turabian** format, because that’s what historians use. I tell students there are all kinds of crazy websites that say they’re using Turabian, but they’re wrong, so they should use the reference books from the library (We have about ten copies of the Turabian guide in the library) or my office.

(Actually, the University of Chicago has a pretty good website:
[http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html/](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html/)

This is the only website they can use.)

I grade these very harshly (only perfect bibs get perfect grades), hand them back, and tell them to keep them, because they’re going to attach them to their next ten-source bibliography and show me they’ve corrected their mistakes.
They can include the five sources they’ve already used, and they add five more. That’s per person, so if there’s a five-person group, each person needs ten sources, with no repeats. (Then they can combine their sources, so I suggest each group member uses the same font, style, etc., which makes it easier to combine.)

**Convincing the Teacher (Me) They’ve Done the Research:**

Next is the research interview. This is a time killer, and I’ve tried various ways to do this (I’ve tried research logs and research presentations to the class), but this works best. I pop in a video or give the students work time and sit outside the door (I’d do this inside the room if I still taught middle school) of my room (with the door open, so I can hear what’s going on in the room) and individually interview each student (if they’re working alone) or in a group. If the group members are in different classes, the other teachers and I set up appointments and meet after school. They have five minutes to convince me they’ve done at least twenty hours of research. If there’s time, we can talk about possible thesis statements, ways to focus their research, where they might find extra sources, if they really need to change their topic (and some will, although it’s bad at this late stage), problems in group dynamics, etc. Students hate this, because there’s nowhere to hide, but this is the most important step of the process.

**Rough Drafts:**

Next, I require a rough draft. These takes the longest to grade, so I give myself at least two to three weeks.

For a paper, I tell them it needs to look like a finished paper, with all the correct spelling, grammar, footnotes, etc., in place. (Earlier, I’ve gone over how to do footnotes by giving them a copy of an article. There’s one I like from the *Organization of American Historians* Magazine, with a narrow argument that uses footnotes. Just a few pages is long enough for them to get the idea. They have to footnote quotes, statistics, and anything they didn’t know before starting their project that’s not general knowledge. What’s general knowledge? Something they found in a textbook or an encyclopedia (or probably Wikipedia). They will attach their rough draft to their final copy.

All the projects except for papers turn in a **process paper** with their rough drafts, too. (We don’t collect bibliographies, because we’ve already graded them.)

For a **documentary**, I need to see five minutes of something with sound.

For a **website**, I need to see their website and get a hard copy of their slides (for proofreading and grading).

For a **performance**, I need their script.

For an **exhibit**, I need a storyboard, with copies of their title, a clearly labeled thesis, their headings and subheadings, their quotes, their visuals (thumbnails are ok), their color scheme, fonts, etc.

**Presenting Their Final Projects:**

I won’t see anything after I give their rough drafts back until our school contest, which is usually around Valentine’s Day.

At Fairview, we used to have groups of three judges, but that required massive amounts of organization, then we usually found that our volunteers, while well meaning, didn’t know very much about history and would be overly swayed by the charming kids who interviewed well. So now, the teachers do all the judging. Over the years, we take building money and department money and get three teachers to judge exhibits, one to judge websites, one to judge documentaries, and two or three to judge performances. Of course, this formula could vary. The documentaries and websites are due the Friday afternoon before the school contest, the judges watch them before meeting with the students, and they have conversations about what they’ve done. Students also turn in their papers the Friday before the contest, we all choose our best ones, and we go drink beer and read each other’s papers and
pick our top ones that go to district. This judging system works far better for us than the old way with volunteers.

**Here’s my timeline and my point value:** (You can see, I’ve got lots of points in my class.)

1st week of school: introduce NHD

Week before Thanksgiving: start showing samples of former projects. If a teacher is new and doesn’t have samples, there are many online. Tell them their topics are due the first week of December.

1st week of December: proposals due (50 points)

2nd week or so, library trip (100 points)—This is an all or nothing grade. If the student misbehaves or doesn’t work, it’s zero. If they behave and work hard, it’s 100.

3rd week or so: in class reading, note-taking (100), all or nothing

1st week back from winter break: five source bibliography (100 points)

2nd week back, ten-source bibliography (100 points)

3rd week back, research grade (It’s good to hand the bibliographies back when you meet and talk about their sources and what they’ve found), (200 points)

two to three weeks after research talk, rough drafts due (200 points)

final drafts (200 points)

I also give kids 25 points extra credit for each level they advance.