

Accommodating Students Needing Extra Supports for National History Day in the Classroom

What is National History Day®?

National History Day® (NHD) is a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for teachers and students to engage in historical research. NHD is not a predetermined, by-the-book program but rather an innovative curriculum framework. Students learn history by selecting topics of interest and launching into year-long research projects. The mission of NHD is to improve the teaching and learning of history in middle and high school.

The most visible vehicle is the NHD Contest. When studying history through historical research, students and teachers practice critical inquiry, asking questions of significance, time, and place. History students become immersed in a detective story. Beginning in the fall, students choose a topic related to the annual theme and conduct extensive primary and secondary research. After analyzing and interpreting their sources and drawing conclusions about their topics' significance in history, students present their work in original papers, exhibits, performances, websites, or documentaries. These projects are entered into competitions in the spring at local, state and affiliate, and national levels, where professional historians and educators evaluate them. The program culminates at the national competition held each June at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Each year, National History Day uses a theme to provide a lens through which students can examine history. The annual theme frames the research for students and teachers alike. It is intentionally broad enough to allow students to select topics from any place (local, national, or world) and any period in history. Once students choose their topics, they investigate historical context, historical significance, and the topic's relationship to the theme. Research can be conducted at libraries, archives, and museums; through oral history interviews; and by visiting historic sites.

NHD benefits students and teachers. For students, NHD allows self-direction of their learning. Students select topics that match their interests. NHD provides program expectations and guidelines for students, but the research journey is unique to each project. Throughout the year, students develop essential skills and foster intellectual curiosity. Through this process, they gain critical thinking and problem-solving skills to manage and use information now and in the future. The classroom teacher is a student's greatest ally. NHD supports teachers by providing instructional materials and hosting workshops at local, affiliate, and national levels. Many teachers find that bringing the NHD model to their classroom encourages students to watch for examples of the theme and to identify connections in their study of history across time.

How Can NHD Work for Students Needing Extra Support?

NHD provides a way for students to demonstrate their learning. Students complete projects as part of an inquiry-based process. Students choose a topic, develop a research question, conduct research, develop their argument, and present their learning. NHD teachers have the ability to adapt, modify, or adjust the framework to meet the needs of a particular student or group of students.

NHD, at its core, is differentiated instruction. Students can select topics that provide a higher or lower level of challenge. Students can choose to work individually or in a group, and students can choose a contest category that best fits their individual needs. All of these factors can be used to differentiate learning, which makes their project more or less challenging or complex. While the NHD *Contest Rule Book* (nhd.org/rules and nhd.org/reglas) is a rule book for a contest, it is NOT a rule book for a classroom. Teachers are in charge of their classrooms.

As a teacher, you will likely encounter students who need additional support in the classroom. This may include:

- Students with physical challenges, disabilities, or health impairments that can require special adaptations or modifications for learning;
- Students with learning disabilities;
- Students for whom English is not their primary language; and/or
- Students with non-documented needs that could require adaptations for NHD in the classroom.

This document offers guidelines and suggestions to help the NHD research process meet the learning needs of students in your classroom. Teachers, in cooperation with special educators, paraprofessionals, and parents or guardians, can create adaptations or modifications to meet an individual student's needs. This document will provide resources, suggestions, and sample materials that can be adapted for use in your classroom. This document will be updated over time to reflect updated practice, language, and resources. If you have suggestions to add to future editions of this document, please send them to programs@nhd.org.

Teachers are legally obligated to follow the specific guidelines set forth in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.¹ Please work with special educators, the student's case manager, and the student's parent(s) or guardian(s) to meet those requirements. While this document will include common types of challenges and accommodations, we realize that each student is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

¹ An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a plan to create a special education experience at a school for students who need specially designed instruction to meet their learning or assessment needs. A 504 Plan (named after section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) is a plan to remove barriers for a student with a disability or a medical issue to engage in regular education. If you have questions about an IEP or a 504 plan a student has, please speak with the case manager or administrator for specific guidance.

Common Classroom Supports to Assist All Students

- An NHD project is a complex, multi-step project. Many students have not completed a project of this scale or scope before. Help all students by developing a plan and breaking the project into manageable chunks or components.
- Provide intentional and communicated due dates for all stages of the project. Inform students, parents, and case managers of these deadlines and expectations in advance.
- Print a checklist of steps of an NHD project for the student to assist with self-monitoring.
- Provide templates or graphic organizers for notetaking, citations, and/or annotations.
- Using shared drives to help students stay organized and maintain files.
- Create lists of starter topics with sources to begin research based on student interests.
- Using citation-generating programs to assist students with their bibliography.

Specific Learning Disabilities

A **specific learning disability (SLD)** may impact a student's ability to learn, read, listen, speak, reason, or do math. SLDs may include (but are not limited to):

- Dyslexia - challenges with reading (pacing, reading fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, writing).
- Dyscalculia - challenges with math at all levels.
- Written expression disorder - struggle to put ideas into writing, manage grammar and punctuation.
- Dysgraphia - challenges with technical writing skills (handwriting, spelling).

Adaptations that can help students with SLDs include, but are not limited to supports for topic selection, reading and research, and writing and project creation.

The hardest part of many projects is getting started. Students may feel overwhelmed when placed in charge of their learning. Potential supports include:

- Provide parameters for topic selection. These may be broad (a topic in U.S. History since 1877) or more specific (all students will select a topic in the Progressive Era).
- Curate a list of highly engaging topics with accessible sources for students.
- Provide starter research materials to help give students a base to scaffold future knowledge.
- Offer starter inquiry questions to help guide students to narrow a topic to a manageable scope.
- Model for students how to brainstorm and identify keywords for research.

Students reading below grade level or students who are unable to process information above their reading level will become frustrated and may shut down. Teachers can help students learn to access appropriate reading materials to improve their content knowledge and help them shape their argument.

- Help students select more common or accessible topics with a wider range of resources.
- Work with librarians to identify resources at a more appropriate reading or Lexile level
- Use AI tools to make text more readable.
- Use online resources and research databases that offer the same content at different levels. Teach students how to use these features as they search.
- Borrow books from a middle or elementary school library.
- Identify research databases with text-to-speech features.
- Identify or provide primary source sets to begin primary source research (from the [Library of Congress](#), the [Digital Public Library of America](#), or [Docs Teach](#)).
- Teach students smart search strategies to help them use common tools more effectively.

- Teach students strategies to analyze primary sources. Consider examples from the [Library of Congress](#) or the [National Archives and Records Administration](#).
- Help students identify audiobooks, podcasts, or age-appropriate documentaries.
- Use assistive technology to “read” texts aloud and improve comprehension.

Many NHD students struggle to transition from research to project creation.

- Ensure that students understand what a historical argument is, the keywords associated with the annual theme ([nhd.org/theme](#)), and historical thinking skills.
- Provide graphic organizers to assist students in developing an argument, planning out their projects, and/or writing their process papers.
- Provide age-appropriate models to help students visualize what final products can look like.
- Use speech-to-text generators to help students gather their thoughts and produce a first draft.
- Create the project in stages, with time for reflection and feedback at each stage.
- Use spelling and grammar-checking programs to assist and improve writing.
- Use text-to-speech generators for documentaries as long as the script is written by the student.

Other Health Impairments

Other health impairments (OHIs) are health issues that can impede learning. Other health impairments may exist in combination with other learning challenges. Health impairments can range from mild to severe and may change over time. These impairments can be faced by students on a short-term basis (a student recovering from surgery or a concussion). These include, but are not limited to:

- Medical conditions that would limit a student’s physical strength (e.g., ability to hold a pencil, maintain balance, etc.);
- Medical treatments that limit a student’s ability to attend school regularly or maintain the energy to complete school work in a different setting; and/or
- Medical conditions that limit the student's ability to pay attention. The most common diagnosis is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In ADHD, differences in the brain lead to challenges with focus, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and executive functioning skills (e.g., getting organized, following directions, dealing with challenging situations, managing emotions, shifting focus, and/or hyper focusing, etc.).

Adaptations that can often help students with OHIs include, but are not limited to:

- Set up a learning management system with sequential lessons and assignments that allow the students to work through developing their NHD project at home, in the hospital, or at school. Include short instructional videos, linked resources, and examples to facilitate understanding and provide necessary support for learning.
- Provide additional time to allow students to achieve project-based learning goals outside of competition rules and timelines.
- Adjust the scale or scope of the project.

For students with ADHD or other attention-limiting conditions, encourage the use of organizational tools to allow students to break down the steps of an NHD project. Print a checklist of steps of an NHD project to assist with self-monitoring. Consider strategic student grouping when and if appropriate.

- Provide a curated list of high-interest, highly-visual topics.
- Provide detailed project schedules and benchmarks. Break complex tasks into smaller tasks.
- Offer preferential seating, standing workspaces, and movement breaks in the classroom.
- Provide case managers and parents or guardians with advance notice of deadlines.
- Schedule additional time accommodations if appropriate.

Speech or Language Impairments

Speech or language impairments can make spoken work challenging to understand. Speech or Language impairments can include (but are not limited to):

- Articulation disorder - trouble pronouncing certain sounds, substituting one sound for another (Oh-Tay instead of Oh-kay).
- Voice disorder - challenges controlling the volume, pitch, or quality of your voice.
- Fluency disorder - disruption of speech, repeating or avoiding words, stuttering, and/or long pauses in speech.
- Selective mutism - the student may not speak in situations that cause anxiety.

Adaptations that can often help students with speech or language impairments include, but are not limited to:

- Use text-to-speech software to record narration that the student has written.
- Discuss and select the appropriate project category with students that best fits their needs.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a set of developmental disabilities that can affect how people communicate and interact with the world around them. It may or may not be paired with another specific learning disability. It may include:

- An inability to pick up on social cues;
- Difficulty engaging in conversation;
- Speaking in an inappropriate tone or about an inappropriate topic;
- Taking language literally;
- Hyper-focusing on a particular topic or issue;
- Stimming, or repetitive behaviors (rocking, flapping arms, clapping hands) that can increase in stressful situations;
- Echolalia - repeating sounds or phrases; and/or
- Being partially or fully non-verbal.

Adaptations that can often help with students with ASD include, but are not limited to:

- Provide headphones for sound sensitivity.
- Provide tactile tools - fidget toys, etc.
- Speak directly to students and avoiding wordy questions.
- Communicate due dates intentionally and clearly to manage anxiety.
- Avoid sarcasm and implied messages when communicating project expectations.

Intellectual Disabilities

Students with an **intellectual disability** have a significantly below-average intellectual ability. They may face challenges with communication, social skills, or the ability to function independently in some or all situations.

Adaptations that can often be associated with students with ASD include, but are not limited to:

- Adjust the scale or scope of the project.
- Provide a structured outline for sections of the project.
- Use sentence stems to assist students with their writing and thesis development.
- Use research to find articles on the student's topic at an appropriate reading or Lexile level.
- Identify for elementary-level books (or audiobooks) on NHD topics to simplify language and comprehension.
- Utilize a classroom aide or paraprofessional as a scribe.

Emotional Disturbance

Emotional disturbance is a broad category that includes a variety of mental health issues. Students will qualify when their issue limits their abilities to learn, interact with peers or teachers, regulate their emotions or behaviors, or develop physical reactions to fears. This may include:

- anxiety disorders;
- bipolar disorder;
- conduct disorders;
- eating disorders;
- obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD);
- psychotic disorders; and/or
- depression.

Adaptations that can often help students with an emotional disturbance include, but are not limited to:

- Adjust the scale or scope of the project.
- Provide options for demonstrating learning that allow the student to have some control of learning outcomes.
- Allow students to shift from group to individual projects at any point if needed.
- Allow students to shift topics if they become frustrated.

Visual Impairments

Visual impairments are problems with vision that are not correctable by common means such as glasses or contact lenses. These can range from partial vision to complete blindness.

Adaptations that can often help students with visual impairments include, but are not limited to:

- Use high-contrast visuals so that students can view images in their own projects.
- Utilize screen readers, braille displays, human readers, and/or descriptions of images or graphics.
- Use adaptive keyboards and mice, or other assistive technologies.
- Provide audiobooks or podcasts to provide an alternative format for historical information.
- Discuss and select the appropriate project category with students that best fits their needs.

Hearing Impairments

Hearing impairments affect students with varying degrees of hearing loss, which can often change over time. Students with deafness cannot hear most or all sounds, even with hearing aids or other devices.

Adaptations that can often be associated with students who are deaf or hard of hearing include, but are not limited to: Provide a structured outline for sections of the project.

- Use sentence stems to assist students with their writing and thesis development.
- Allow scaffolded note-taking.
- Utilize an interpreter and/or transliterator as appropriate.
- Use a classroom aide or para-professional as a scribe.
- Use adaptive devices as appropriate.
- Discuss and select the appropriate project category with students that best fits their needs.

Deaf-Blindness

Students with **deaf-blindness** face a significant loss of both vision and hearing

Consider a combination of the adaptations suggested above to meet the student's needs.

Orthopedic Impairments

Orthopedic impairments are physical impairments that can impact learning. This may be a short-term issue (e.g., broken foot, arm, etc.) or a long-term condition. This can include:

- Medical conditions that include a physical difference (e.g., club foot, students who do not have function in an arm or leg, or who are born without a hand, etc.);
- Physical impairments caused by a disease;
- Medical conditions like cerebral palsy; and/or
- Amputations, fractures, or burns.

Adaptations that can often help students with orthopedic impairments include, but are not limited to:

- Provide extended time or assistance for classroom learning tasks that require motor skills.
- Discuss and select the appropriate project category with students that best fits their needs.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a severe injury to the brain that can create learning challenges.

Adaptations that can help students with a traumatic brain injury include, but are not limited to:

- Providing extended time.
- Limit the scope and scale of the project.
- Use classroom models or sample projects to ease anxiety.
- Provide limited choices for projects with teacher support of appropriate research materials.
- Consider categories that limit screen time.
- Discuss and select the appropriate project category with students that best fits their needs.

Multiple Disabilities

Students with **multiple disabilities** deal with more than one disability listed above (for example, a student with cerebral palsy who is also blind).

Adaptations for students with multiple disabilities can vary and are dependent on the specific disabilities that each individual student may have. Please refer to the adaptations under that specific disability in order to support specific students with multiple disabilities.

Students Learning English

Students learning English face a double challenge—to engage in the historical research process while learning a new language. They may struggle with reading and written expression.

Adaptations that can help students who are learning English include, but are not limited to:

- Provide structured outlines for sections of the project.
- Use sentence stems to assist students with their writing and thesis development.
- Allow students to utilize spell check and grammar check.
- Use language translation programs or consider sources that are written in the native language of students.
- Use assistive technology to help make text more readable.
- Provide content-specific mini-lessons on the historical context of student topics.
- Use classroom models or sample projects to ease anxiety.
- Provide direct instruction on NHD project-based skills, such as historical argumentation and thesis development.

NHD thanks the teachers and coordinators who contributed to this guide. If you have suggestions to add to future editions of this document, please send them to programs@nhd.org.