

# Creating a History Day Performance

The performance category can be one of the most exciting ways to participate in History Day, since it is the only category in which students present their research live. Entries in this category must have dramatic appeal, but not at the expense of historical information. Creativity is the key here, and students must make effective use of their 10-minute time allowance.

Here are some suggestions for students who are preparing performances:

- Choose a theme-related topic that has personal interest and that will work particularly well as a performance.
- Decide whether the chosen topic will be most effective as a group or as an individual performance.
- Research the topic first. Write important facts or quotes which might be important to the performance; write a thesis statement, supporting statements, and a conclusion; and think about how these might become a part of the performance.
- Prepare a script. Brainstorm about general ideas and the ways they might be presented. If a group is performing, each member should describe different ways that the characters might interact. When writing the script, make sure it contains references to the historical evidence found in the research. Using actual dialogue, quotations, or excerpts from speeches are good ways of putting historical detail into the performance. Remember that the script should center on the thesis statement, supporting statements, and the conclusion.
- Be careful not to simply present oral reports on individuals which begin when they were born and end when they died. Instead, become the historical figure and write a script around an important time or place that will explain the major ideas.
- Prepare the set. Think about different types of sets which might help in depicting the topic. Is there a prop that is central to the story?  
Important: Don't get carried away with props. Content is the most important factor, and any props used should be directly related to the theme. Remember that performers have only five minutes to set up and take down their props.
- Prepare the costuming. Use the most authentic costumes possible. Good costumes help make a performer convincing, but be sure they are appropriate to the topic. Consult photographs or costume guides if unsure about appropriate dress.
- Prepare the blocking. To block a performance is to determine where the actors will stand, move, and/or relate to the set. Students should think about these movements when deciding what type of set to design.

Practice, practice, practice! Work on the delivery, speaking clearly and pronouncing all words correctly. Practice voice projection so that the judges and the audience can hear every word. Practice with the set and full costumes as often as possible.

# Five Steps to Draft a History Day Performance Script

By David Sherman

## **STEP ONE:** Before you start.

This is a basic assumption we will start with: you have already done your research. Do not proceed unless you have a broad understanding of your topic, a clear thesis, and an extensive collection of primary sources to draw from. Please note that there are sections of this guide that ask students in groups to work individually. This is intended to help you generate more ideas and encourage more creative scenarios for staging. If you are creating an individual performance, just complete all the steps, even if they are labeled as “group”.

## **STEP TWO:** Working with your primary sources.

1. The following are individual tasks that should be done separately from your partner(s).
2. Select out twenty minutes worth of primary source excerpts, from a minimum of twenty primary sources. Using short excerpts is better than long ones.
3. List the themes/concepts that arise from these sources. Look for ideas that are common to more than one source, and hopefully encompass several.
4. Swap excerpts and list all of theme/concepts with your partner(s).
5. Select the ten that best accomplish the following:
  - connect to this year’s History Day theme
  - demonstrate the topic’s significance in history
  - exemplify or illustrate your passion for the topic.
6. Brainstorm a story line and list of possible characters. Revise this list in **STEP FOUR**.

## **STEP THREE:** Identifying and organizing your sub-topics.

1. Individually, write a list of events associated with the topic you have selected.
2. Place these in chronological order.
3. Swap these with your partner(s) and continue working individually.
4. Identify events that have a cause/effect relationship. That is, one event directly caused or indirectly influenced by another event. Draw arrows between these events.
5. Select several (at least five) of these cause/effect relationships that:
  - are interesting or unique, not obvious
  - relate to this year’s History Day theme
  - demonstrate the topic’s significance in history
  - exemplify or illustrate your passion for the topic
6. Get back together with your partner(s).
7. Share, select and then combine these cause/effect relationships.
8. Separately, from your partner(s), write about 8-10 quarter page explanations of the following:
  - 3-5 of the individual events identified above
  - 3-5 of the cause/effect relationships selected with your partner(s) above
9. Get together with your partner(s) again and swap these explanations.
10. Together, pick out the explanations that do the best job of:

- explaining your topic
- relating to this year's History Day theme
- demonstrating the topic's significance in history
- exemplifying or illustrating your passion for the topic

**STEP FOUR:** Considering characters and setting.

1. Choose character(s)
  - a. Select the best characters to tell the story, explain the connection to the theme, demonstrate significance in history, and, most importantly, create emotional tension.
  - b. Consider the best number of characters to use considering the following:
    - your subject story
    - your talent at portraying distinctly different characters
    - the number of people in your group
2. Create a setting. At this stage, don't worry about where your props will be placed on stage. Do worry about making the setting:
  - relevant to your topic
  - simple to create without moving props
  - visually interesting (uses a variety of levels, encourages actors to move, uses front, rear, sides of stage)
  - keep in mind that all props for competition must be easy to transport on bus and plane

**STEP FIVE:** Putting it all together—draft the script.

1. Select lines or dialogue that introduce the setting, your topic and create drama. This is similar to the attention getting device in the introduction of an essay.
2. Write a short (1/2 page maximum) outline of the topics you need to cover. This will help you logically sequence your ideas.
3. Select primary sources that illustrate/explain your narration and/or make your characters come to life.
4. Weave the narration, primary sources, characters and setting together to draft your script.
5. Remember, a draft is a trial run. You may not like what you come up with the first time and your teacher and classmates may have ideas for you to consider. Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to rewrite the script and make changes as you begin to rehearse and polish the performance.

# Tips for Performances

*By Barb Lachman, Shorewood High School, Shoreline, WA*

You can do this! If you have performance skills, poise and don't mind speaking in front of a group, this is a good way to showcase your research. If you lack some of these skills, don't panic...you can still do this! This handout is intended to give you some tips to make your presentation more interesting and powerful. (You'll also think of creative things that I'd never dream of!) REMEMBER: You don't have to be the most amazing actor to have a great performance. Use the tips and do what all good performers do: create a performance that uses your strengths!

What skills or resources do you have?

- Acting
- Memorization
- Other arts – visual art, instrumental or vocal music, dance
- A person or place with information, period props, or clothing

**CONTENT.** Creating your script is the first step. Think about the things below as you work.

**A. Thesis.** All of your content should be very strongly connected to your theses. It doesn't matter how interesting or artistic part of your performance is if it doesn't add essential information to your thesis!

**B. Sequence.** Think of your performance as a journey for the audience. Each piece of information should take them closer to your conclusion. Put all the elements of your facts, primary testimony and performance into an order that tells the story of your journey in stages. Each idea should connect onto the one before it.

**C. Types of Elements.** Include a variety of elements to keep interest, but be true to your thesis.

- Facts- narrated evidence that is not a quote
- Primary Sources- quotations from a particular person that can be acted in character.
- Invented Script- a scripted "scene" that you write which represents a typical situation or a reconstructed historical event.
- Other performance-dance, song, music, pantomimed action

**II. BLOCKING.** This is movement of people within your acting space. Create a variety of different arrangements considering the factors below. Think about how the symbolism of your blocking will complement your message.

**A. Levels.** How could you use props that complement your thesis to vary performance levels? Try to use these props, boxes, stools or chairs to have some variety of levels. Think about the different levels you could use naturally- standing on the floor or platform, sitting on a chair or

floor, kneeling, lying down. In general, people at a higher level seem to have greater control or power. Consider this as you plan your movement.

**B. Areas.** Parts of your acting area that are “downstage” (closer to your audience) are stronger and you want your most important information delivered there. “Stage right” is the left side of the stage as the audience looks at it. This is the strongest side of the stage. “Down center” or the center area closest to the audience is also strong. Use all areas of your acting area, but you can highlight certain parts of your performance by using these areas. Use asymmetrical arrangements to add visual variety. In a group performance have a narrator down right while others pantomime action in the up left area or vice versa.

**C. Arrangements for Group Performances.** Patterns created by actor placement and movement can send visual messages to an audience.

- Triangles – Our eyes like to look at interesting patterns. In a group of three or more people, you can block your action to make triangles.
- Diagonals- They communicate excitement or conflict. Put performers at diagonals from each other, and add to the diagonals by being on different levels.
- Straight Lines- They can help complement a feeling of conformity, order or discipline.
- Circular Patterns-Circles and curves help create a feeling of peace, contentment or luxury.
- Tableau- This is a “picture” in 3-D with your performers frozen in position. A series of pictures could tell a story or just one could highlight a point. You could also have performers jump out of the picture to say a line or make a movement. Decide whether transitions between tableaux should be sharp and sudden or smooth and melting to complement your content.
- Contrast- To focus attention on one actor, the highlighted person should do something different. He or she could be alone in an area, be at a different level, be moving while others are still or vice versa. The audience will look at a person whose position or movement contrasts with others.

### III. ACTING/STAGE PRESENCE.

**A. Basics.** Everyone needs to have these elements below going for them.

#### 1. Movement

- Strong, confident posture without nervous rocking, pacing or fidgeting
- Well-planned movement during blocking changes
- Variety of movement styles for characters, so the audience can see (as well as hear) that a different character is talking

#### 2. Voice

- Projection – Use a strong voice that is appropriate for the room size (not too quiet or loud).

- Articulation - Pronounce every sound clearly. This is CRUCIAL for an audience to understand you, and it is a very common problem that can destroy a good performance. Get help for this.
- Rate - You need to speak slower than normal for a large group to hear you.
- Vocal Variety - Use changes in pitch, volume, pause, rate and emphasis to communicate clearly and to create different voices for each character.
- Accents - Use them only if you can create them very realistically. Otherwise, you may be perceived as making fun of people. When in doubt, go without.

**B. Transitions.** To create transitions from characters to narration.

- Narration is delivered in your own voice in a conversational and natural tone with eye contact given to the audience.
- Character voices are delivered in a more exaggerated tone with a voice that may be unlike your own. Choose a focal point to look at if you're not looking at a fellow performer.

**C. Style.** Don't make your acting too exaggerated. Characters that are natural and more realistic are received better than overdone acting, which can look corny and amateurish.

**D. Elements.** Remember to include those areas where you have special talents, if you can. Think about including dance, music, and more character acting if that's what you do well.

**IV. STAGING (Sets, Props, and Costuming)** For a lot of reasons it's best to keep this simple, and that's why it's the last thing to consider. You can get more power out of a few strong, symbolic choices than an elaborate set that you have to load and drag and set up. Make a few strong choices that take advantage of your abilities.

**A. Setting.** Consider the following when designing your set:

- Platforms (or boxes, chairs, stools, etc.)- They add level variety and interest to the scene.
- Backdrop-It serves a dual purpose to set the mood and give you a place to hide props or change costumes. Use fabric instead of butcher paper. It will last longer, it looks better, and muslin isn't that expensive. Support for the drop can be created from partition screens, particleboard or a framework of PVC pipe. Create something that folds smaller and can fit in a car or van. (If you're good, you may have to get this on a plane!)
- Lighting- This isn't crucial for most, but perhaps the addition of a large flashlight as a "spotlight" or a lamp will add something to your concept.

**B. Props.** Choose some simple suggestive items to highlight your points. These could be accurate for the time period or they could be symbolic. (For example: a scroll could symbolize a college education).

**C. Costumes.** Keep in mind that these have to be simple if quick changes are necessary. Here are some ideas:

- Keep your general clothing simple and suggestive of the thesis or time period. You don't want to distract from what you're saying by having an elaborate costume. The only exception might be for a performance in which you are playing the same character all throughout.
- Add simple pieces to suggest characters-jackets, vests, hats, scarves, shawls, etc.
- Caution: Make your costume changes smooth and simple. Even if you can duck behind a screen to make a change, if you do this often it becomes annoying or dull. Try to make changes simply so they can occur right in front of the audience or in a weaker (upstage) area. Try to make a costume change part of the transition of your content.

Finally, HAVE FUN! A performance is a lot of work, but it may be the most effective way to communicate your thesis. If you are passionate about your topic, your enthusiasm will be obvious to your judges and audience. And, if you care and have fun, they will too.