

This Guide has been updated to take into account the theme for 2011 – “Defining Moments”.

We would like to thank Miriam Meehan for preparing this guide to addressing the National History Challenge. Miriam is a former State coordinator of the Challenge, & is now one of the chief judges. Feel free to copy this advice for your students - & to use it yourself when judging school entries.

Judging the Challenge

So, you want to know how the judges of the National History Challenge come to their decisions? It's not a big secret – all the information that you need can be found on the National History Challenge website – www.historychallenge.com.au

But let's go through what the judges are looking for in an entry anyway.

The judges' guide at any level of the competition is always the criteria that have been laid down as a part of the competition rules. ALL entries MUST meet these criteria if they are to have a chance of winning at any level. It is also VITALLY IMPORTANT that ALL RULES for presentations such as word counts, dimensions, bibliographies and footnotes are followed. There is nothing more heartbreaking for the judges than having to disqualify work that is beautifully produced, has clearly involved enormous time and effort but does not meet the criteria or the rules in some way. So how do you avoid this outcome?

If you look carefully at the criteria and the scores applied to each section it is easy to see that the HISTORICAL QUALITY of the entry is the most important marking component (as it should be in a history competition!!). But what does this mean?

1. HISTORICAL ACCURACY

You need to ensure that information that you have included in your presentation is as accurate as possible. The only way to get this part right is to read and research as much as is possible for your age. Ask teachers, parents, friends to proof read so that you avoid errors like 1814 instead of 1914 etc.

2. USING A RANGE OF DIFFERENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This is just good commonsense and if you have been following the first criterion properly, you will easily be able to fulfil this one. Documentaries, films, books, magazines, personal interviews and websites will provide you with a broad spectrum of opinion and ideas and enrich your understanding of your topic. This is invaluable for the interview stage of the judging because it makes it so much easier to talk about your topic and your work. However, it should be remembered that the judges are interested in QUALITY NOT QUANTITY. This means that having 100 references in your bibliography that you have not really gone into in any depth will not help you against a student who has 5 references that they have used and know well.

3. USING BOTH PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES WHERE APPROPRIATE

This criterion is clearly connected to the one above. It is not enough, especially for older students, to rely on websites or textbooks as their only basis for information. The use of primary sources such as letters, postcards, interviews etc will not only enrich your presentation but possibly offer you a whole other perspective. There are few, if any topics where primary sources of one kind or another cannot be accessed.

4. EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE PERIOD

Developing empathy for your topic is a natural outcome of good research. It means that you have developed an understanding of your topic that goes beyond the facts. You have an opinion about your person or issue, you can understand or can explain some aspects of motive; you can discuss outcomes and reasons. When asked, you have a clear idea about why you chose this particular topic, what interested you in the first stages and how your ideas have changed or become clearer over the course of your research. An excellent understanding of the facts of the topic will not be enough on its own. Judges want to see that you have connected or engaged with your topic.

5. USE OF EVIDENCE AND INFORMATION TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE ARGUMENT.

Simply reciting the facts of your topic is not enough to produce a winning entry in the National History Challenge. Your entry is tied to a theme so you need to demonstrate how your work does this. In some of the Special Categories, there are extra points to be addressed as well. It is very important that you read and study the information which has been given by the sponsors of the Special Category you have chosen, and which is on the website.

Another form of argument could also be why the chosen topic warrants being studied – for example, family history is a popular choice of topic in this competition. Part of your argument could be how the experiences of someone who is not famous or well known was a Defining Moment in some aspect of Australian History. When you are developing your topic, try to use questions that begin with “*why*” or “*how*”. This way you can work on avoiding facts alone.

6. CLEARLY RELATE TO THE THEME IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Criteria 5 & 6 work together well. Your topic must relate to the theme – you need to clearly demonstrate why your choice of topic was a *Defining Moment*. Your topic also needs to have an HISTORICAL CONTEXT. This is particularly important if you have chosen to investigate something that is a current issue. An example of this might be the floods in north-eastern Victoria. How do these relate to AUSTRALIAN HISTORY? What is the HISTORICAL BACKGROUND to the current debate on water management? All judges have seen some outstanding work on current issues but these entries have often failed to address the historical nature of the topic and therefore they have not been able to advance far, if at all, in the competition. The other area that often suffers with this criterion is the multimedia presentation method,

especially websites. Having great technical expertise is NOT the same as having great historical understanding. If you want to create a website as a means of presentation, you MUST make sure that you have the HISTORY CONTEXT as well.

7. SHOW A PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE THEME.

In this criterion you demonstrate that you have a clear understanding of the “*Big Picture*” of the theme i.e. What is meant by the idea *Defining Moments* in History? How do we know that something, be it an event, person, issue, idea etc is a defining moment in Australian history? Can a family or institutional event or issue be a defining moment? How? If you have thought through these types of questions (and this list is not exclusive) then your work will reflect your thinking, your answers in the interview process will have these thoughts underpinning them and you will be able to address some of the earlier criteria. Remember, events, issues and ideas do not occur in a vacuum – they are a reflection of the society and attitudes in which they are created.

8. HAVE A CLEAR AND LOGICAL ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE.

This criterion is a standard history skill – your work needs to make sense, have a sensible and understandable progression in terms of layout and information. No piece of history work, be it essay, model, play or website will properly convey its argument or information to the viewer unless it makes sense.

9. EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE ITS IDEAS

Does your work attract the viewer’s attention? Are your arguments and details easily understood by others? Do your ideas about the theme and the importance of your topic reach the reader/viewer clearly? Students who write essays often worry about this criterion because the usual presentation of an essay is not as eye catching as perhaps a play or website might be. You shouldn’t worry at all. A good essay is often more effective at communicating ideas because you have the word limit and material to do this. Other methods have more limitations on them in terms of these kinds of things. However, no entry is unable to meet this criterion. Effective communication does not mean being flashy and colourful – it means that whoever reads/sees/hears your work knows exactly what it is you want to say about your topic and the theme.

10. HAVE A BIBLIOGRAPHY OR ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

It is always distressing for judges to have to disqualify work because this simple rule has not been addressed. Bibliographies should be built up over the course of your research. If your age group requires that you have an ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY then this is what you MUST have in your entry. It just means that you make an assessment of the items that helped you to build your work. Some sources are better than others – some have better illustrations, others are great for explaining issues or controversies within a topic. Don’t be afraid to say that a source was not as helpful as you had hoped it would be and why this was the case. In fact this kind of inclusion shows that you are developing sound critical evaluation skills which are an essential part of the tools of the historian’s trade.

11. SHOW AN ORIGINAL APPROACH

Anyone can do a project on the Eureka Rebellion – how can you approach it in a way that is different, that shows you have given it real thought. Your method of presentation can help here but it is not the only way to be original. Perspective is a good way to find a new view – examine the story from a different viewpoint. Women? Indigenous Australians? Migrant viewpoint? Primary Sources? How has History (various historians) viewed your topic over time?

The History Challenge has produced some stunning work from students over the years. Some of the most enjoyable moments for judges have been watching students learn things about their families, their schools, their country that they did not know before they entered the competition. The one criterion that does not really appear in the list but is the most fun for judges to see is enjoyment – you have been excited by the experience and you have enjoyed the journey of discovery you have undertaken.

When you reach the interview level of the competition at regional and state level, let the judges see who you are and what you have learned from your work. However, it is also wise to think ahead – if your work goes through to national level you will not be interviewed. Your work must speak for itself so you need to make sure that your entry is self-contained – the theme, the historical context, your topic do not have to rely on you being there to make sure that the judges see them in your work.

These are just a few hints to help you along the way. Talk with teacher. Read the website. Make sure that you stick to the rules. Check out the requirements for the different methods of presentation. Know what the various sponsors expect to see in entries in their categories. Most importantly, enjoy yourself.

GOOD LUCK.