

# Seven Steps to a Powerful Heritage Fair Project

Created by the BC Heritage Fairs Society (BCHFS) with contributions from The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC2).

**Seven Steps** is a teacher’s guide to the pedagogy of Heritage Fairs and inquiry-based learning. It offers teaching suggestions and resources to help students work through each step of an historical inquiry project—from choosing and refining a topic of personal and historical significance, digging deeply and critically into that topic, connecting their findings with broader themes, all the way to creatively sharing their conclusions in a public forum.

1. Deciding on student “voice and choice”
2. Generating questions
3. Investigating sources
4. Reaching a conclusion
5. Telling our story visually to a wider audience
6. Presenting the project
7. Reflecting on the research and conclusions

## Step 1: Deciding on student “voice and choice”

### *How much say should students have in choosing their research topic?*

The choice of topic for a Heritage Fair is a key first step towards a successful project. It should be selected carefully in light of relevant criteria. Equally important is deciding to what extent students choose their own topics. Freedom to choose topics may be more motivating for students, but the decision needs to fit teacher and student needs. According to Roland Case of The Critical Thinking Consortium half of the Heritage Fairs students and teachers he meets are excited by giving students free choice of topic; the other half are terrified. Whatever the decision about student voice and choice, it will be less worrying when everyone understands a shared set of criteria for deciding on a suitable topic.

### Criteria for selection of topics

Several considerations are key in selecting a research topic. The topic should be:

- **connected to Canadian history:** The only clear requirement for a Heritage Fair topic is a connection to Canadian history.



- **do-able:** The inquiry should not be so vast that a student will get lost in the multitude of themes and sources, nor should it be so obscure that sources are too difficult to find.
- **engaging:** The topic must engage the student sufficiently to warrant spending extended time to research, create and present their project.
- **historically significant:** Ideally the topic should go beyond narrow personal interest and touch on issues of historical significance. For example, students may be engaged by and be able to find multiple sources for a study of their grandfather's life, but that topic *per se* is not significant. If the student's grandfather immigrated to Canada or experienced the Second World War, his life may be connected to a bigger story of how Canada has changed over time.

### Guide student choice

Beyond agreeing on the core criteria, you may want to direct students towards inquiries that fit with the broader themes for the social studies program for their grade level. Here are several options ranging from more teacher direction to less:

- Provide a list of topics that students may select from, but not be limited to. Pre-selecting topics helps to ensure that adequate sources are available or to identify whether particular skills, such as interviewing, are required. Potential topics for students to consider are listed at [Project Topics and Ideas](#).
- Establish a common time period (e.g., 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada), a broad theme (immigration, human rights) or a common historical thinking concept (continuity and change, cause and consequences) for the class to consider.
- Pose a common question that all students attempt to answer within their project. For example, "What was the impact of a significant event, person or invention during the early 20th century?" Or "How have various aspects our town changed and stayed the same since the 1950's?"
- Show students examples of past Heritage Fair projects found at [Portfolio](#) on the BCHFS website or from your own selection from previous years. Invite students to choose a topic that meets the core criteria.

In all cases, you will need to work with your students to ensure that the topic choice meets the agreed upon criteria, particularly that it will be personally engaging. For more ideas on helping students discover their own topic, see the blog post [Beyond Hockey](#).

### Step 2: Generating questions

*What questions can students ask about their topic?*

One of the strengths of learning history from a Heritage Fair project is that it invites students to ask questions. According to researcher Sam Wineburg, “Questions are the tools of creation,” and those who are adept at historical inquiry are “expert at cultivating puzzlement.” For example, as described in the [Portfolio](#) section, one student chose the topic of hockey and explored, "How has the hockey stick changed?" Another looked at Champlain and the Wyandot (Huron) and asked, "Who benefitted the most from contact?"

### Brainstorm possible questions

An effective way to generate questions for individual topics is for students to brainstorm in small groups or as a whole class. Before students start generating questions, introduce or review a few basic rules for brainstorming, and ask students to think of and discuss possible challenges to these rules. Doing this reduces the need to interrupt the brainstorm session to discuss the procedures. Some basic brainstorming rules include:

1. ask as many questions as you can;
2. do not stop to discuss, judge or answer any of the questions;
3. write down every question exactly as it was stated;
4. change any statements into questions.

If generating questions on individual topics, arrange for students in small groups to focus on each topic in turn until all the topics have been brainstormed.

Students who are not accustomed to developing inquiry questions may echo the kinds that they read at the end of textbook chapters. These are often closed questions that call for a “yes or no” answer or a factual answer. You may wish to share examples or scaffold their questions with [Enriching Projects with Historical Thinking Concepts](#). Alternatively, introduce the qualities of an effective inquiry question after students have done some initial brainstorming.



*Examples of some of the inquiry questions for Heritage Fair projects found at [Portfolio](#).*

A tutorial to prepare students to frame effective questions to guide research is available from [Research Questions](#).

### **Step 3: Investigating sources**

#### *How do we find answers to our questions?*

While doing a Heritage Fair project *invites* critical thinking about the past, it does not guarantee it. Simply sending students off on their own to the computer room or library to research a topic is unlikely to produce very satisfying results.. Many students may simply copy information from texts and websites. This is “research as ritual” with little in-depth historical understanding. It is helpful to pose the following questions and explore student responses before beginning research:

- How will you go about answering your questions?
- What sources will you use?
- How will you know if your answer is a good one? (i.e., an accurate, deep, insightful, original, thorough answer)

#### **Tools required for effective historical research and inquiry**

The research stage is, according to Alberta's teacher guide, [Focus on Inquiry](#), when students often become frustrated because they can't find information specific to their inquiry, they don't know how to handle irrelevant data, or the sources are too difficult to read. To move past the frustration, teachers need to help students see that these feelings are ones that all inquirers experience, to teach them relevant research skills, and to ask them to assess their learning as they go. The Alberta guide suggests students will be more successful if they:

- write or talk about how they find answers to questions;
- write in a journal or log about their feelings and strategies during the inquiry;
- share with others (peers, teachers, parents) their successes and frustrations at each phase of the inquiry;
- develop lists of ways to address their frustrations.

#### **Guide students toward effective research**

An effective inquiry question will help focus students, but students may still feel a compulsion to copy as much information from secondary sources as possible and stuff it on a display board. As well, students may use primary sources merely as illustrations, without an explanation of how they provide evidence to answer the question. Here are four strategies to encourage students to deepen their research:

- choose sources, both secondary and primary, that are relevant to their inquiry question;
- go deeper than surface interpretation to make thoughtful inferences from primary sources;
- consider context of an account and identify the author's position;

- consult various sources to cross-check their conclusions.

With further guidance students will also be able to consider:

- the purpose of the creator of a source;
- the importance of the audience;
- how purpose and audience can influence their interpretation of the evidence.

Teaching materials to support students in selecting important information for a specific research question are available at [Relevant Details](#).

### **Interviews as an effective tool of research**

Students are frequently encouraged to conduct interviews as a source of valuable evidence. However, as above, if not properly guided, the approach students take to interviewing and the questions they ask yield surface level information.

Teaching materials to support students in developing strategies to prepare and conduct interviews are available at [Interviewing Techniques](#).

For more in-depth research, **CAPES** (such as those worn by Superhero Historians) can be a useful mnemonic posted on the wall and used to scaffold analysis of primary sources:

**Context:** What was happening at the time this source was created? How might that affect how we interpret this source?

**Audience:** Who was intended to see (or read) this? How might that affect how we interpret it?

**Purpose:** What was the author (photographer, creator) setting out to do? Why might this affect your interpretation?

**Evidence:** How does this source help answer your inquiry question?

**Support:** How does this evidence fit with any other evidence that you have?

A resource to teach students identify clues around the “edges” of a historical document to learn about its author, audience, origin, purpose and type is available at [Reading Around the Document](#). This technique also teaches students:

- make careful observations and draw plausible inferences about the context of historical documents prior to analyzing their contents;
- acquire background information about a historical document in anticipation of further investigation.

Students may also be overwhelmed by too much information, especially if it is contradictory. They may have trouble understanding or interpreting their data. One strategy is to encourage careful data collection using a form, Appendix 4: Heritage Fairs Research Organizer developed by the BCHFS. This document and other tools listed below for scaffolding learning can be downloaded from [Appendices](#):

- Appendix 2: Historical Thinking Routines
- Appendix 3: Beyond Face Value
- Appendix 5: Reflection on Process.

The BCHFS web site includes an annotated list of links to [Secondary Sources](#) and [Primary Sources](#), and a blog entry on [Self-assessment](#).

#### **Step 4: Reaching a conclusion**

##### *What does our evidence tell us about our inquiry question?*

Students will be better able to interpret their research and mine deeper historical meaning in their projects if their data are organized. As well, encourage students to spend time along the way writing and talking about their learning and cross-checking sources. Historical Thinking Routines (mentioned above) suggests practices to encourage this.

A further challenge is that of weaving together information and ideas to create a coherent answer to the inquiry question. This is especially difficult when a deadline is looming. To help students synthesize their evidence and information, Jennifer Watt and Jill Colyer<sup>1</sup> suggest the following kinds of questions to guide students:

- What is similar about this evidence?
- Are there two or three points or arguments that are consistent across a number of pieces of evidence?
- Is a theme reflected in more than one data source?
- Are smaller patterns contained within the theme? If so, what are they?
- On closer inspection, what evidence is not a good fit? Why?

One way to encourage going beyond surface level research towards more in-depth historical thinking, is to require students to support or “back up” their claims. Teaching resources to assist students in organizing facts and supporting overall conclusions is available at [Connecting Facts to Conclusions](#).

##### **What are the big ideas that we have learned?**

A potential problem that researchers have found at this stage is the tendency for students to ignore their evidence and “just make up” what they think the answer should be. We can help students see the connection between evidence and conclusions by providing frequent opportunities for them to “go meta”—be metacognitive—by prompting them with questions such as:

- I used to think...but now I am thinking...

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<sup>1</sup> Watt, Jennifer and Colyer, Jill. (2014) *IQ: a Practical Guide to Inquiry-Based Learning*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 110.

- Here is what I am thinking so far...
- The sources A and B lead me to think...
- The source A confirms what source B shows me because they both ...
- This source changed my thinking because ...
- This conclusion is very different from what I thought it was going to be because...

Mind maps, which may become an element of their final display, help students see connections, themes or big ideas. Impact timelines are another strategy to help students see connections, themes or big ideas. Timelines allow students to

- identify relevant and significant events;
- create an informative time scale;
- visually represent the sequence, span and impact of events.

More specifically, creating a timeline can help a student exploring why, for example, her great grandfather was placed in an internment camp during WWI:

- understand the larger historical context of her grandfather's experience;
- visually represent the sequence of events from her grandfather's arrival in Canada as an immigrant recruited by the Canadian government, to a being labelled "an enemy alien;"
- determine the most significant events that led to her great grandfather's internment.

A teaching resource to guide students in visually demonstrating the sequence and span of related events and showing the impact of these events is available at [Impact Timeline](#).

### **How certain are we of our answers?**

Let students know that it is okay to be uncertain about their conclusion. In fact, staying curious and raising ongoing questions are qualities of a good historian. Various students working from different sources may reach different conclusions to the same question. These situations provide a wonderful opportunity to explore more deeply the concepts of evidence and interpretation.

### **Step 5: Telling our story visually to a wider audience**

#### ***How to build a powerful exhibit***

Encourage students to think of the Heritage Fair presentation as a mini-museum in which the students are museum curators and designers. According to Linda D'Acquista, museum professionals refer to their exhibitions as displays that tell a

story or stories.<sup>2</sup> Building a story line can ensure that their answer to the inquiry question is coherent and compelling.

Although students should be allowed to present their projects in the medium of their choice (ranging from web pages to children's books), the most widely used medium is a display board. Building a powerful display involves asking two questions:

- What big ideas or stories do I want to tell the visitors who will see my display?
- How can I get visitors to experience and understand this big idea or story?

The PowerPoint [Your Mini-Museum](#) gives detailed instructions for making a display board.

### Decide on “One Big Idea”

After their research, students may have many ideas that they want visitors to learn. They may even be tempted to tell everything that they know. However, most Heritage Fair visitors spend only a limited amount of time with any one exhibit. Students need to eliminate some of their findings and identifying “one big idea” can help determine what to include and what to exclude. They should think of that big idea as a one-sentence answer to their inquiry question.

### Decide on a story line

When students have decided on their big idea, they should choose the key research findings that support it and use them to tell a story. For example, one grade seven student's exhibit featured Ginger Goodwin, the popular organizer for the mineworkers' union on Vancouver Island in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His big idea was that Goodwin's fight for safe working conditions is still important today. His story line for the exhibit had five elements:

- Conditions in the coals mines of Cumberland on Vancouver Island were dangerous.
- Ginger Goodwin organized miners to strike for safe conditions.
- Goodwin was shot at close range by a special police constable in suspicious circumstances.
- Although conditions have improved, there is still a need to fight for safe working conditions.
- Cumberland honours Ginger Goodwin to this day.

### What to put on the display board?

The main focus of a display panel should be to tell the story about the topic. As well, in preparation for the presentation and interview about their project, students should be ready to explain their research including:

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<sup>2</sup> D'Acquisto, Linda, (2006) *Learning on Display: Student Created Museums That Build Understanding*. Alexandria VA: ASCD.



- how they used their sources;
- especially intriguing sources;
- sources that confirmed or contradicted their thinking.

Encourage students to include key primary sources in their display.



*This display uses its title, fonts, colour and layout to engage the viewer.*

Consult the BCHFS slide show [It's More than a Display Board](#) **LINK TO COME** for more ideas to support students when developing their display boards.

## **Step 6: Presenting the project**

### *How do we connect with our audience?*

The form of the presentation often varies. Some teachers encourage students to give a short speech about their topic and visitors often ask students for an introduction to the topic. In other cases, especially at Regional Fairs and the Provincial Fair, visitors and judges/interviewers ask questions, and there is little time for a formal speech. Students should prepare for both a short speech and an interview.

### **Presenting the topic**

While the exhibit/display is the visual focal point of the presentation, effective verbal communication is a key element of powerful presentations. It is important for teachers to help students:

- recognize when verbal communication connects with the audience;
- appreciate how the elements of verbal communication (content, tone voice) will change depending on the audience.

Teaching materials to support students in organizing an effective speech that connects with their audience is available at [Resonating Voice](#).

A key piece of advice is to remind students to use their display board to tell their story. Some students unintentionally focus on their speech and forget that they have visuals that can help them tell their story.

### Preparing for the interview

Students can get ready for their interviews by anticipating the questions they will be asked. Common questions asked of students include the following:

- Why did you choose this topic? What should others learn about it? What makes it historically significant?
- What evidence supports your answer to your question? Did all your sources agree? What did you do if they disagreed?
- How certain are you of your answer to your inquiry question? Are there other reasonable answers?

Interviewers might also ask questions about the research behind the project such as

- How did your research change your thinking about this topic?
- What new skills did you learn as you worked on your project?
- What new questions about your topic would you like to explore?

Students will be better able to answer these questions if they can point to key primary sources on the display board to support their answers.

The Heritage Fairs Alumni run a [Blog](#) with useful posts on preparing students for an interview. Consider the following entry:

*Judges absolutely love when students are able to show the historical significance of their topic; in fact, it's a question many judges will ask you if you don't already cover it during your presentation. Make sure that before your presentation, you really know exactly how your topic has affected Canadian history, or maybe talk about what it would be like if your event or person had suddenly disappeared from history. Would we be better off? Or maybe worse off? Make sure you show that you really know the importance of your topic and why it deserved to be the focus of your Heritage Fair project.*

*All in all, make sure you are always having fun during your presentations. Try to forget that you are being marked, and just pretend you are telling your best friend about something you're really interested in. You'll be able to have much more fun and overall will appeal to the judges a lot more than*

*someone who looks nervous or doesn't appear to be enjoying presenting their topic.*

## **Step 7: Reflecting on the research and conclusions**

### ***Did we meet our objectives in the project?***

The following questions are useful at any step in the process, but especially at the end of the project, to encourage oral or written reflection:

- What have I learned?
- How well have I met my goal?
- Was I successful in developing a project that tells an important story about Canada's heritage and/or about someone who has made a difference in some big or small way to make Canada a better society?
- What changes should I make?
- What was the highlight of the day? The low point?

The previously mentioned Reflection on Process contains a self-assessment form for students with more specific questions for different steps in the inquiry process.

General Gordon Elementary teachers Romy Cooper and Graeme Cotton use the following questions in their final reflection:

- What new skills did you acquire over the course of this project of which you are most proud?
- How has this project changed your thinking on the topic?
- What are your next steps related to this project?

Heritage Fairs provide an excellent opportunity for project-based historical learning. Student participation is an engaging way to learn social studies curricula, strengthen understanding of their Canadian heritage and grow as engaged citizens.