

# Communication in History: The Key to Understanding

The 2021 National History Day theme asks you to think about how communication has impacted people, ideas, or events in the past. You may initially think about the physical tools or technology we have used to communicate, such as the Pony Express or the invention of the telephone. **Remember that communication has happened in many different ways**, such as speeches, art, fashion, or protests. Communication has always been a key part of history. As you consider your History Day topic, think about the following questions.

## What was being communicated? Why?

We use communication to share information with others. Identifying the message itself is just the first step. **It's important for you to understand not just what the author said, but their reason for communicating it.** Look at the topic through the eyes of the participants to figure out their motivation and goals. What was someone hoping to influence or change? Did they want to call attention to or solve a problem? Did they want to build support for a new idea, new system, or a leader?

- *In 1948, the United Nations approved a "[Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)," to list out the rights that all people should have, no matter the country in which lived. The committee that created it hoped it would end the kinds of atrocities that happened in Germany.*

## How was it communicated?

Communication has happened in many different ways. **Be sure to consider the impact of how a message was communicated.** Some communication happened physically, through newspapers, printing, or the internet. Messages were also shared orally, through the telephone, television, or speeches. You might also find topics where communication happened through art or music, sign language, carrier pigeons to send messages, or movements to teach young people indigenous languages, like Hawaiian or Ojibwe.

Beyond the method or tools used to share a message, you may need to think about **the author's choices in how they communicated their message.** Was the communication private or meant for the public? Did the author want to provide information, or did the author want to persuade their audience? Was the communication clear and effective, or did the audience misunderstand what the author was trying to say?

- *Reporting on earlier wars was done through newspapers and newsreels shown before movies in theaters. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was the first war covered by [television journalists](#) and shown nightly on the news. What impact did seeing the war this way have on people in the United States? How does seeing video images of a war, daily, in your home, change how people feel about war?*

## What impact did it have?

For your History Day project, you will need to make an argument, or thesis, **that summarizes the impact of your topic on history.** The impact may be positive or negative. The impact may have been felt around the world, or just in your community. It's your job as a historian to figure out the impact by answering the question "so what." What did your topic lead to? What changed because of your topic? Which people or what events were influenced by it?

- *In 1985, [employees of the Hormel Factory](#) in Austin, Minnesota went on strike. The local union, P-9, demanded changes in working conditions and wages, striking for nearly thirteen months. It is known as one of the most influential workers' strikes in Minnesota history, and led to parent labor unions working more actively to support local labor unions when they were negotiating contracts with companies.*

## Have you considered other points of view?

Communication has the potential to impact every person, group, or thing connected to a topic. Each person, however, has a different experience of the world, with their own beliefs and values. Thinking through the following questions might help you to think about how different individuals or groups might understand the communication, based on their viewpoints.

- ✓ Who created the message? What did they want to happen?
- ✓ Who was the intended audience for the message? How did others respond to it?
- ✓ Which values or beliefs were represented in this message? Which values or beliefs were missing?
- *When the communist Soviet Union took control of Eastern European countries following World War II, the former British Prime Minister [Winston Churchill warned of an 'iron curtain'](#) descending across Europe in a speech on March 5, 1946. Western leaders heard it as a call to action and unity. Soviet Union leaders and allies in Eastern Europe heard it as a threat.*