

*Chicago Metro History Fair Project Workshop*

# PERFORMANCES



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## *From Research to Script*

Every great History Fair performance starts with a sound thesis and solid research. They are the foundation of your project and you will return to them again and again as your script takes shape—so start off right!

### **1. Chose a topic for your project**

- Chose a topic that has historical significance, interests you and has a story to tell.

### **2. Determine your research question and as you get into your research develop your thesis.**

*For example. The Chicago style blues music communicated the culture and resources of the city that the Southern blacks found when they moved to urban Chicago. That new style, created by the encounter between Chicago and Southern black musicians, spawned other genres of music such as R&B and rock and roll that are heard even today.*

### **2. Divide your notes into four categories.**

- Historical Context:  
*(Great Migrations, industrialization, post World War II)*
- Specific Causes of the topic:  
*(electricity, Delta blues)*
- Facts about the topic:  
*(names of blues musicians, type of blues music, number of people who came and their lives in Chicago)*
- Impact on the future and in different arenas:  
*(-sound technology available in the city paved way for use of electric guitars)*

#### 4. Write an essay with all of these notes.

- In your intro, include some historical context and your thesis statement. Seamlessly weave your thesis into the concept of your script.

*For example:* Have a great-grand child listening to today's rap music. Have his great grandparent come into the scene. The teen can then scramble to turn off the music and begin apologizing for the "noise." The great grand parent can then start into the storytelling. She can tell her great grandson that rap is a product of music from her days. Then within the conversation the entire idea of the thesis will be communicated without specifically stating "My thesis is....."

- In your conclusion, within character, discuss the significance of your thesis and summarize how you elaborated and proved your thesis. This is the last part of your performance that will be heard by the Judges. This is your chance to sum up your "conversation."
- Weave your thesis statement throughout your essay. Every time you discuss a new angle of your topic, include your thesis.

*For example,* as you begin describe the new culture Southern blacks found in Chicago, you might say: "Because the blues reflected the life of the musicians, blues written in Chicago was bound to be different because of the new experiences the musicians had in this big city. The city offered new....(then describe the new environment and experiences)"

*Another example.* As you discuss the impact of your topic, you might write: "Had blues musicians never encountered the technology and difficult living condition in Chicago, we would not have the electric sound used by bands such as the Rolling Stones...(then describe the impact the Chicago style blues had on other artists because of the new sound and edgier lyrics).

#### 5. Develop a Performance.

- **Pick your scene(s).** One approach to creating the performance is to start with the scenes, or setting. As you begin thinking about the possibilities of "where" your actions can take place and your words can be heard, you will get a good feel for the type of performance that will fit your content. Also, considering the scenes will lead you into considering the characters of your performance.
  - If you are considering a group performance then you may want different characters in different places. You may want your audience to travel through time as you move from one character to the next. Make sure that your approach is clear to the judges and audience. The different points in time should be signified in the script, the scene, the props and costumes.

*For example, you may want one character at a sharecropper's farm in the south, and another in a blues club.*

- If you are in an individual performance then you may want to limit yourself to a single scene.
- **Generic scenes** - These are scenes that could be used in any performance, regardless of the topic. They are always a good place to start. Ex. Your grandmother's attic where you find an "artifact", a classroom, museum, office, store, or park bench.
- **Topic specific scenes** - If your topic is the Chicago blues, then you might consider a blues club, a sharecropper's farm in the south, etc.

## 6. Pick your characters.

- **Generic characters** - Again, generic means it can be found in any performance. These characters might include a narrator, you, a teacher, a reporter, etc.
- **Topic specific characters** - During your research, what names were central to the topic?  
*For the blues, there is Alan Lomax (A Caucasian man who went into the South in the 1940s looking for blues musicians), there are the people who answered ads to work in Chicago, there are the musicians (such as McKinley Morganfield, aka "Muddy Waters"), there was a photographer who got to know them and took a lot of pictures, etc.*
- **Character Interactions** - If you are in a group performance begin to think about how your characters will interact. Will the characters speak to each other or will you have each character exist separately?

## 7. Write the script!

Just as in your essay, include the thesis statement and historical context in your intro and include evidence of how you proved your thesis in the conclusion.

See the point above about weaving your thesis throughout the performance. The more times you can look a judge in the eye and connect a portion of your information with your thesis, the better!

- What characters are you going to use? Will they be topic specific or generic?
- Do you want to use a narrator?
- What story do you want to tell? Will you need more than one scene?
- Make a checklist of historical content/ideas that must be brought to life in the performance. Don't forget the historical context is the main purpose of the project. Audiences need to know the social, economic, political conditions at a time because human actions don't occur in a vacuum. They also need know who or what came before.

*If you were using the Chicago Blues example you would not have a performance that completely ignores the Southern musicians.*

- Decide which character is best suited to convey the particular idea
- Write the first draft of the script.
- Read back over the script using your checklist. Did you forget any must-have historical content?
- If all the historical content is there then it is time to spice it up. How can you make the performance more believable and entertaining? Add comedy or drama?
- Check to see if your characters are interacting in a comfortable manner. For instance, you don't want your characters to sound like a walking encyclopedia. Have some ease in the way the characters interact.

## **Props and Costumes**

**KEY PRINCIPLE #1:** What you say is the most important element of your performance! (That's why the essay is so important. Once you write the essay, you can be confident that your project has solid research and that you can make a sound argument).

**KEY PRINCIPLE #2:** Go easy on the props and costumes especially if you intend to change characters. (You don't want the judges staring at your costume instead of listening to what you have to say. The costume should complement or enhance your content).

**KEY PRINCIPLE #3:** Be efficient when using props and costumes. (Try to have them handy. If you have to disappear behind a wall for too long or if you have to walk to another part of the stage to change characters, it will be very distracting for the judges. For example, keep your hat or cane hanging on the chair or coat rack that you will walk past as you are changing characters. The changes you make should complement or enhance what you are saying at the moment you are making the change).

**Prop/Setting Ideas:**



## *Performing Your Script*

**Acting 101:**

- Make eye-contact with the audience (especially the judges!).
- Speak slowly and clearly. Remember when you're nervous you may tend to speak faster.
- Your movement should match and enhance your speaking. Don't make any movements that distract from the content of the performance. Have a purpose for the movements you make. Know what to do with your hands and body at every moment during your performance.

**Delivering your lines:**

- Match your tone of voice, facial expression, and movement to your lines. (Whether you are timid or a drama queen, lines can be delivered without the audience ever understanding the meaning. If you have something shocking to say, be shocked from your eyes to your elbows, to your fingertips to your knees to your toes. If you have something sad to say, cry and look sad, but make sure your lines are still clear).
- Be dramatic when necessary. (Be in the character. Even if you are the narrator and are just supposed to be yourself, at that moment you are delivering the most important information your audience will ever hear. Make them listen!)
- Be emphatic when necessary. Never let the judges miss your thesis or the times you are restating your thesis. Use your body, eyes, and voice to get the point across!

- Never underestimate the power of hand motions! (They work for the least dramatic and the most dramatic person when you are trying to convey something clearly).

**Other good principles:**

- Consider your talent, but balance it with *CONTENT*. (A performance that is moving or funny but never asks and answers historical questions belongs on Broadway, *not* in the History Fair).
- Look *ALIVE!* Use your body, your facial expressions, and your voice to captivate the audience. Don't be afraid of big gestures and a loud voice.
- Practice, practice, practice especially in front of different people. Ask them: Can they make sense of your thesis? Do they understand what your performance is about? What did they understand the historical significance to be? Can they hear and understand you (sound and speed)? Is there a logical flow—especially if you are changing scenes or characters?