**CHOOSING A RESEARCH TOPIC**

As you get ready to start your own historical research, you should know that the first step in any historical analysis is the most basic: choosing a topic to research. In this course, you will be required to submit your research topic for approval at the end of Theme: Approaches to History, Learning Block 1-4.

The topic must be an event in American history. You may choose a topic that is related to any of the case studies contained in this course, or you may choose your own topic, with the approval of your instructor.

Here are a few pointers to help you choose your topic:

1. Pick a topic that interests you. You're likely to do more research, and do it faster, when you're genuinely engaged by your topic.
2. Pick a topic that is credible and relevant. Avoid sensationalism; don't waste your time trying to research the history of alien abductions or Elvis sightings. And make sure your topic is historically relevant—that is, a topic that requires you to do real historical research, not just express your opinions.
3. Narrow it down. A topic that's too broad will require you to sift through too much information and make it hard for you to focus.
4. Ask your instructor for ideas. Your instructor can also help you decide what topics are credible and relevant and how to narrow down an overly broad topic.
5. Make sure you can find the needed resources. If your topic is too obscure or too narrow, you might have trouble finding enough relevant sources.

Choose from the following:

1. **Irish Immigrant Experience**

In Theme: Approaches to History, you will learn more about the struggle of immigrants to win equal rights in American society. Our first case study will look at the experience of Irish immigrants in the United States in the 19th century.

Between 1820 and 1860, more than one third of all immigrants to the United States came from Ireland. This wave of majority Catholic immigrants reached its peak during the failure of the potato crop, known as "the Great Hunger."

Many Irish immigrants were poor and uneducated, making them initially ill-equipped for the emerging industrial economy of America. These immigrants experienced religious discrimination and backlash against their presence in major industrial centers like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

**2. The Equal Rights Amendment**

The second case study in Theme: Communicating Historical Ideas examines the extended national debate over the Equal Rights Amendment and its ultimate failure to win ratification.

In 1923, Alice Paul, a prominent feminist and advocate for women's rights, announced that she would propose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would ensure the same rights to women and men. This seemingly simple proposition nonetheless engendered decades of controversy and heated debate, and it was not until 1972 that a version of Paul's Equal Rights Amendment was finally approved by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

The debate over ratification played out at a time of tumultuous social change: women entered the workforce in record numbers, women's-rights advocates challenged centuries-old symbols of male privilege, and the Supreme Court, in *Roe v. Wade (1973)*, affirmed women's right to reproductive choice. While the path to ratification at first seemed clear, ERA opponents, led by conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, fought back. Their essential argument—that granting women equal rights would deprive them of important benefits, including workplace protections—was embraced by organized labor and by many working-class women.

As national support for the ERA began to flag, Congress extended the deadline for ratification by three years, but it was not enough. In 1982, the deadline ran out, with the ERA still three states shy of the 38 needed for ratification. The fight for equal rights had, at least for the time being, fallen short.

**3. The Voting Rights Act of 1965**

The first case study in Theme: Analyzing History looks at the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its impact on African-American political participation.

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed overt discrimination in public accommodations and government services, it did not directly address the most fundamental denial of African-American rights: the concerted effort to prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote.

President Lyndon Johnson's landslide election victory in 1964 emboldened him to seek voting-rights legislation, despite concerns that this would alienate conservative Southern Democrats whose support was needed to pass Johnson's Great Society social programs. Television coverage of the brutal police response to peaceful voting-rights protesters in the South—most notably, the attack on protesters at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama—galvanized public support for a bill.

Southern opposition in Congress was fierce: opponents waged a 24-day **filibuster** in the Senate, and Southerners in the House used every parliamentary tactic they could find to block the legislation. But it eventually passed and was signed into law on August 6, 1965, with both Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks in attendance.

The immediate impact of the Voting Rights Act was a dramatic surge in African-American political participation, with a commensurate increase in the number of African Americans elected to public office. In the longer term, the Voting Rights Act contributed to a historic realignment of the two political parties that has had a profound impact on American politics and society.