

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## Sets the Stage

History doesn't happen in a vacuum. Events, people, and ideas are indelibly shaped by the world around them – the political, social, intellectual, scientific, cultural, and economic realities of that time and place. Students need to show in their project how their topic fits within the historical context that surrounded it. Here are some ways to think about historical context:

**Background Events** – What were the events that led up to this topic? Example: How did the conclusion of World War II set the stage for the Cold War? How did the French and Indian War lay the foundation for the American Revolution?

**Social Norms** – What was the social environment like at the time? Example: Racism, segregation, and Jim Crow form the setting from which the Civil Rights Movement emerged. It's also an important context for Jazz music, Jackie Robinson, and a host of other topics.

**Intellectual Trends / Scientific Knowledge** – How did experts understand this issue or question at the time? Example: What did scientists believe about disease transmission during the Flu Pandemic of 1918? How did Social Darwinism influence popular culture, or politics, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century?

**Cultural Norms** – What cultural beliefs were held by this community? Example: What behaviors were considered inappropriate for a man or a woman? What was the prevailing view of a woman's aptitudes and role in this time and place? What was the prevailing view of a man's aptitudes and role?

**Political / Legal** – What was happening in local, state, national, or international politics at the time? Example: How did state laws requiring literacy tests curtail Black peoples' ability to vote?

**Economics** – How did the economy shape peoples' lives, choices, and decisions? Example: The Great Depression, crop failures, resource shortages.

**Other Contexts** – Can you identify other contexts that are relevant to your topic? Example: What contexts can help us understand the reasons that Japanese American citizens were sent to incarceration camps in the U.S. during WWII?

In many cases, your topic will center on a creative response, reaction, or attempt to change the prevailing circumstances of the time. A good understanding of the historical context will help you see and describe change over time, and to identify short- and long-term change.

