

“Rights & Responsibilities in History” 2025 Annual History Day Theme

This year’s theme is about the connection between what is owed to people (rights) and what people owe to one another or their community (responsibilities). The way these two ideas are connected can help us learn about the past. How did people interact with each other? With their community? How did things come to be in the present?

Rights are freedoms or privileges that people have as human beings or people who live in a community. They are things that you are allowed to do, be, or have in a specific group. Rights are often protected by laws or rules, like the right to vote, own property, or freedom of speech. *For example, you may have the right to have a cell phone at school.*

Responsibilities are expectations of people as members of a community. They are things you are supposed to do. Responsibilities might be based on laws, personal beliefs, or agreement within a group. *For example, having a cell phone at school means you have the responsibility not to distract others.*

Many of you will start picking a topic by thinking about rights. That’s a great start!

- **You could focus on the fight to "get" a right.** For example, Minneapolis teachers went on strike in 1970 to get better pay and working conditions. Their determination and support from the community helped win the right for teachers to strike in Minnesota.
- **You could look at a time when a group of people were denied their rights.** For example, the 1883 Code of Indian Offenses outlawed certain Native American religious and spiritual ceremonies in the U.S. despite their first amendment rights.
- **You could focus on time when a group exercised their rights.** For example, in 1994 Black South Africans used their right to vote in the country’s first election that included all races. The election was won by Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first Black president.

The theme asks you to **think about both rights and responsibilities.** How are they connected to each other in your topic? Each topic is different. There’s no requirement for how they must show up in your project. **It’s okay to focus on one half of the theme more than the other.** Just be sure they are both in your project.

Historical Context Matters

The rights you have today are connected to this place, time, and group of people. The same was true in the past. People’s rights varied at different times and in different places. How did this affect their ideas of rights and responsibilities? You will need to understand the historical context of your topic. This is the larger setting in which your topic happened. Historical context might include things happening in the economy, religion, politics, or society at the time.

Reminders about “Rights and Responsibilities”

There are a few things you should remember when presenting your topic.

- **Avoid Presentism:** Presentism is when you look at the past through the lens of today’s values and ideas. Historical context will help you to understand the topic through the eyes of those living at the time.
- **Focus on What Actually Happened:** Ideas about what “should” have happened make for weaker historical arguments. Focus on what did happen, and how it changed history.
- **“In History:”** It is impossible to understand the long term importance of a current events. We just don’t know yet. Try to pick a topic where the main events happened at least 20 years ago. If you’re interested in recent history, try looking into how that topic came to be.
- **Based on Research:** A right generally has a source, like the Bill of Rights or a Supreme Court decision. Responsibility can also be found in documents, like a code of conduct. Sometimes responsibility comes from people’s beliefs. Saying that someone “felt responsible” should be followed with historical evidence showing how you know this.