History Day Performances

To create effective History Day performances and avoid the dangers of the "firing squad" or the "talking book report," students should analyze the basic elements of a performance at both the beginning and the end of the project-creation process.

Scenario
Scenario should be established almost immediately in the performance. The character or characters need to identify four important elements within the first thirty seconds to a minute:

Character: Who are the players and what are their roles within the topic? Characters may change, but the subject of the performance should be addressed first.

Time: What time period does the performance address? This time period may shift throughout the performance, but a foundation must be set at the beginning.

Place: Where is this taking place? Again, this may change throughout, but students need to establish a setting so the performance does not become a monologue or dialogue delivered in an unidentified, unrelated space.

Role of audience: Who is the character speaking to? This is most important in an individual performance so it does not appear that the character is randomly telling his life story to an empty space. The audience should have a specific role, so in fact the individual performer is creating a dialogue.

Blocking
Blocking is the movement of a performer related to the content of a script. After students have established a scenario, their movements should reflect the elements listed above. Deliberate movements and natural pauses are essential. Students should not sit down simply because they have been standing for a while, nor should they necessarily stand or sit for the entire performance. Appropriate hand movements and character-specific actions should be considered. For example, an older character may sit for a large portion of the performance, or use a cane; a woman from the 1800s would not lean or slouch, as she would be wearing a corset.

Props
Props are objects, documents, backdrops, or illustrations used to create setting and propel the script. Backdrops are effective if significant costume changes are needed, but are not always necessary to create a setting. Objects, documents, and illustrations offer students an opportunity to use primary sources within their performances, such as newspaper articles, letters, journals, photographs, or government documents. These props often push the script along it scenario, giving students a chance to explain certain elements of their topic with appropriate objects. For example, a woman on the WWII homefront may pull out a letter from her husband serving overseas.

Costumes
Costumes can be abstract or historical, and can be used to establish characters or abstracts. If costumes are historical, they should be relatively accurate (a Civil War uniform will not work for a WWI performance) but need not be elaborate. Abstract costumes, in which the performer wears all black or white or some other simple combination can be useful if the performers are portraying several characters or an all-knowing narrator.

Script
An individual performance is a monologue, and a group performance is a dialogue. The script, just like a documentary script, should address all elements of the topic that a student finds important, and it should flow in a cohesive, sensible manner. A script that covers 200 years and nine different characters will be confusing, but a script that shows change over time with two different characters can be effective. The script, either monologue or dialogue, should begin as an outline and can be filled in with primary sources, quotes, and student-composed dialogue.

Last Important Notes...

1. Certain topics lend themselves to performance, especially those with strong individual characters or those that involve powerful speeches or writings

2. There are many different approaches to creating a performance and not one is essentially better than another

3. Movements must have meaning and must create an emotional rhythm; remember, these are real people being portrayed