

How to Become an “Expert” on Your Topic

Sample Topic: Rosa Parks

Ask the **BIG** Questions...

Who? Who were the major historical figures during the time period? Who was the king/queen/president/leader of your country or region of interest? Who influenced the views of your person/topic of focus?

An enhanced understanding of Rosa Parks would require knowledge of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, the Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges, the NAACP and various other players that influenced the Civil Rights Movement. Knowledge of President Dwight Eisenhower and his beliefs and actions regarding Civil Rights would also enhance a student’s understanding of Rosa Parks. A student could also research Parks’s childhood, including her early experiences with the Ku Klux Klan.

What? What major events took place in the years leading up to, during, and after your topic of focus? What social forces or movements influenced your topic of focus? What did your topic of focus contribute to these larger events and forces?

The Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, Jim Crow Laws, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 all contextualize Rosa Parks refusal to give up her bus seat. The Montgomery Bus Boycott that resulted from Parks’s actions is an important short-term impact that students could draw.

Where? Where did your topic of interest take place? Did other countries or regions influence your topic? Where did your person of interest grow up/live?

Parks lived in Montgomery, Alabama, a southern state. Alabama seceded from the Union during the Civil War, an action that helps define the sociopolitical makeup of the state. Rosa Parks grew up in Tuskegee, the home of Tuskegee University, a historically black university founded by Booker T. Washington, but also the location of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which was controversial due to its unrepresentative use of African American males.

When? When did your topic of focus occur? Were other movements were also parts of this time period? Does your topic of focus fit into a larger era?

Rosa Parks’s historic refusal to give up her seat took place on December 1, 1955. *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided a year earlier, and the Civil Rights Act was not passed until nearly a decade later. The chronological order of these events helps shed light the complexity and contingency of the Civil Rights Movement.

Why? Why does your topic of focus matter in the larger context of history? Why did your topic of focus take place? What other events or movements were catalysts of your topic of focus?

Parks was actually sitting in the “colored” section of her bus, but was asked to move further back in order to accommodate white individuals who could not find seats in their section. Three other African-Americans were asked to move and complied, with Parks did not. Also, Parks had previous encounters with the bus driver, James F. Blake. He had once left her in the rain for not entering the bus from the back door. All of these details, as well as other events encompassed in the Civil Right Movement help explain *why* Parks refused to move. A strong project addresses *why* questions, rather than just stating that an event happened.

How? How did prior events influence your topic of focus? How does your topic of focus connect with past and future events? How did your topic of focus impact history in the short and long term?

Parks’s story has become famous in terms of the Civil Rights Movement; that in itself could be considered a long-term impact. However, her fame and notoriety often left her unemployed following her famous refusal to give up her seat, a short-term impact of the event.