

Selecting a Museum Topic

Some schools are clear about their museum content from beginning of the project. Others want to create a museum but aren't committed to any particular idea. Schools that fall into the second category may find the following approaches useful in generating ideas for their museum project.

An Instructional Unit. The simplest way to select a museum topic is to choose an instructional unit within the curriculum and transform it into a school museum project. Using the existing unit outline as a framework, students create museum exhibits that reflect already established instructional objectives, but they approach the material in an innovative and engaging way.

A Theme. Some school museums examine a theme from the perspective of different disciplines. For example, a school museum about inventiveness might explore what it means to be inventive in science, literature, art, and mathematics. As students create exhibits that illustrate the qualities of inventiveness in different settings, they make comparisons across subject areas and expand their understanding of the theme.

An Issue. Political, social, or human-interest issues provide intriguing content for school museums. Issues such as social justice, racism, environmental stewardship, or media influences are of high interest to students and can be addressed through many subject areas.

A Concept. School museums can be organized around an essential concept at the heart of a discipline. For example, a school museum about power, authority and governance—one of the ten thematic strands in the national social studies curriculum standards—might present different events in world history that illustrate these concepts.

A Request. Local museums, community centers, cultural organizations, libraries, and public services organizations may have ideas for student projects that support curriculum goals. Responding to such requests makes the project problem-based and may provide a service learning opportunity for students.

An object. Sometimes an object already on display within a school provides the motivation for an exhibition. Colfax Elementary School in Colfax, Wisconsin, installed a large freshwater aquarium in their front lobby. To support this installation, students created interpretive exhibits about habitat, behavior, and biology.

An event. Sometimes school or community events can provide the impetus for a museum project. For example, the History of Our School Museum at St. Paul's Elementary School was created in anticipation of the school's 125th anniversary. When this happens, exhibitions support the curriculum and capitalize on community interest in a local event.

A combination. These general approaches can provide direction for selecting your museum topic. If you see overlap among the approaches, blend them!