

What if . . . ?

*“History is not merely what happened; it is what happened
in the context of what might have happened.”*

– Hugh Trevor-Roper

Counterfactual history is a thought experiment that alters a past event and examines its effect on later history to learn about consequences and actions that might have been taken in the past.

The Point of Divergence is the identification of a branch point between actual history and a fictitious alternative. These are often dramatic, decisive events such as battles, wars, and elections that generate clearly different alternatives. However, they can also appear as everyday events that are often ignored by the casual observer. Without a clear Point of Divergence it is very difficult to engage in counterfactual investigation.

Rule 1: A good counterfactual exercise tampers with as little of actual history as possible but still manages to make a major impact with what is changed. For example, Abraham Lincoln was challenged to a duel in 1842. The history of the United States might have been dramatically different had James Shields killed him during their duel.

Rule 2: An effective counterfactual scenario should checkmate critics who argue that things would have worked out the same way anyway

Project Phase 1: Planning

1. Do preliminary research to choose the historic event you will do your counterfactual project on.

Examples: What if the battle plan had not been dropped at Antietam?
What if Lincoln had not been assassinated?
What if Booth had killed all three targets?
What if the Confederates secured the high ground at Gettysburg?

2. Identify the Point of Departure.
3. Decide on how you will do your presentation. This must include a 1 – 2 page report on the actual historic background of your event.

Possibilities: PowerPoint presentation
Play
Video
Short Story
Report

4. Get approval for your project

Counterfactual Planning Sheet

Group members:

Counterfactual:

What if

Point of Departure:

On the back of this sheet, briefly outline the actual historic events leading up to the moment of your Point of Departure. Then describe the specific Point of Departure when something occurs in a different way than it actually happened. Then show how history is changed and how the world today is different.

Method of presentation:

Approved _____ Comments:

Civil War Counterfactual Project Rubric

Names: _____

Project Description: _____

What If _____?

	4	3	2	1	Total	
Project Planning	Project plan was thorough and on time.	Project plan was complete and on time, but needed some additional detail.	Project plan was on time but needed much more detail.	Project plan was not turned in on time.		
Use of Research Time	Students effectively used research time.	Students occasionally needed to be reminded to stay on-task during research time.	Students frequently needed to be reminded to stay on-task during research time.	Students were mostly off-task during research time.		
Sources	At least 4 sources cited, at least one of which is from a book. Works cited page is complete and in proper format.	At least 3 sources cited, at least one of which is from a book. Works cited page is complete and in proper format.	At least 2 sources cited, one of which is from a book. Works cited page is complete and in proper format.	No works cited page.		
Execution of Project Plan	Presentation closely follows plan. All revisions were approved beforehand.	Presentation follows plan with only a few exceptions. Major revisions were approved beforehand.	Presentation does not follow plan very well.	Presentation is entirely different from plan.		
Overall Presentation	The presentation is well organized, holds the attention of the audience, and is very interesting.	Presentation is well organized and is interesting.	Presentation does not flow very well but has some interesting facts.	Presentation does not flow very well and is poorly presented.		
Content	Project is well written, listed facts are accurate, and grammar and punctuation are used correctly.	Majority of the text is accurate. Few grammar and punctuation errors.	Majority of the text is accurate. Spelling and grammar errors detract but content is understandable. Needs some revision.	Many factual errors or errors in spelling, grammar, and sentence structure destroy understanding of content. Major revision is needed.		
Grade:	22 - 24 = A	19 - 21 = B	17 - 18 = C	15 - 16 = D	Below 15 = F	Total Points
						Grade