

## Writing a History Paper

### *Formulating a Research Question*

Every research project starts with a question. Your question will allow you to select, evaluate and interpret your sources systematically. The question you start with isn't set in stone, but will almost certainly be revisited and revised as you read.

Every discipline allows for certain kinds of questions to be asked. History is a pretty permissive discipline in this sense, but some kinds of questions can cause problems down the road or can only be answered by appealing to explanatory schemes that fall outside of the purview of academic history. They are not *empirically resolvable*. A good question requires research (not just reflection or opinion) and is narrow enough to allow for an answer. Here are some kinds of questions one should generally try to avoid.

#### Common Problems in Question Posing

1. *The Deceptively Simple Question*  
A question that demands a simple answer to a complex question.  
Ex: When did women achieve equality?
2. *The Fictional Question*  
Ex: If Hitler had been accepted to art school, would World War II have happened?
3. *The Stacked Question, or, The Embedded Assumption*  
Ex: Why did the Carter presidency fail?
4. *The Semantic Question*  
A question that hinges on the definition of terms.  
Ex: Are all radical revolutions violent?
5. *The Impossible-to-Answer Question*  
Ex: Was World War I inevitable?
6. *The Opinion or Ethical Question*  
Ex: Was Truman wrong to authorize the use of the atomic bomb?
7. *The Anachronistic Question*  
Ex: How good was ancient Athens' record on civil rights?

The biggest problem a researcher could have is an **absent question**. Since it is never possible to include everything, it is necessary to have a question to help guide you through the thicket. Starting with a research question instead of just a topic will make it much easier to come up with a thesis – it will simply be the answer to your question –, but without a question, it's hard to imagine how one would come up with an argument.

#### *Is this a good research question? A Self-Test*

1. Does my question allow for many possible answers? Is it flexible and open-ended?
2. Is it testable? Do I know what kind of evidence would allow an answer?
3. Can I break big "why" questions into empirically resolvable pieces?
4. Is the question clear and precise? Do I use vocabulary that is vague or needs definition?
5. Have I made the premises explicit?
6. Is it of a scale suitable to the length of the assignment?
7. Can I explain why the answer matters?