**What makes a good research question?**

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| **Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four hours sharpening the axe.**   * The Internet (not Abraham Lincoln) |

A research question guides a historical investigation much like a compass guides a ship at sea. It provides a sense of direction and, just as important, sets limitations on the investigation. Without direction and limitations it becomes frighteningly easy to get lost amidst copious amounts of material, leading a researcher astray onto various tangents that takes the researcher further and further from the end goal. Without direction and limitation, it becomes difficult to decide what to do, how to do it or even where to go.

A good research questions has several key aspects. It is focused on a specific objective. The focus provides a suitable scope for the project (approx.. 1500-2000 words). It is an open-ended question that permits in depth examination and the ability to explain a topic, not simply describe it.

**Are there any good starting points in defining a good research question?**

The key concepts of History form a good place to begin: **Historical Significance, Continuity and Change, Cause and Consequence, Perspectives, and Moral Judgement**. Exploring these concepts will make it easier to conduct an in-depth investigation requiring effective analysis. Storytellers tell stories. Historians do not just tell stories; they explain them as well. The key concepts are a good basis for understanding History in a way that fosters explanation.

Another good way to start is to look at a topic that is interesting. What makes it interesting? What puzzles you about it? What do you want to understand in a more complicated manner? Can you identify relationships within the story that might offer chances to explore a concept or why/how the relationships affected the story and/or those people within the story? How do you explain changes or lack of changes in the story? What are the most important aspects of the story? How do you explain the reasons the story happened the way it did? All of these questions can help lead to a good research question.

**What interrogatives help define a good research question?**

**The five Ws and one H** help with establishing basic information: who, what, where, when, why and how. **Only why and how** offer good starting points for in-depth exploration of a topic. What can be modified to make it an acceptable interrogative such as in the example above: “What role did Calvinism play in the establishment of Apartheid in South Africa?” Adding the modifying conditions offers the ability to analyze and interpret a topic.

* Why
* How
* To what extent…
* What factors…. (contributed to, led, affected, etc.)
* What impact…
* What explains…

**Examples:**

* What were the most important reasons for the failure of the women’s suffrage movement in England from 1865-1904?
* How significant were economic rivalries in the development of war between Japan and the United States up to 1941?
* To what extent were the Women Air Force Service Pilots significant towards the war effort of the United States of America during the Second World War?
* To what extent did the Cuban Missile Crisis lead to the eventual signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in October 1963?