

History Research Papers

WRITING SERVICES - UNCW - DEPAOLO HALL, 1ST FLOOR - 962-7857

To write a good research paper, you must ask a good historical question.

History is the study of **change over time**. When somebody writes a history paper or book, she is **offering an interpretation** of how and why something changed over time.

So a historical question is one that asks how to interpret change over time.

Not every question about the past is a historical question. Historical questions address **change** and how to **interpret that change**. They must have boundaries of **time, place, and people**.

Bad: How did African-Americans react to World War Two?

Better: How did Southern African-Americans react to the draft in World War Two?

Best: How and why did lower class African-Americans from North and South Carolina respond to the draft from 1941-1945?

This last question focuses research on a **specific group** of people in a **specific place** during a **specific time**. Because there is a response over a period of time, it allows several answers, including how their response could have changed over the time period.

A good question is also one that is **significant**. You should be able to say why it is important to answer this question.

Your interpretation must be supported by the **primary sources**. You need **evidence** to support your interpretation. Different interpretations are possible, so why should the reader believe yours over someone else's?

To come up with a question, pick a narrow topic.

The easiest way to pick a topic – picking something general or really famous (e.g.: Civil War, Nazis, WWII) – will leave you with too broad of a topic. You need direction and focus; otherwise, you will have too much information or will get bored with what you already know. It is not that there is nothing new to learn about those kinds of topics, but if you cannot say exactly what new thing you want to learn about it, you are probably not as interested in it as you think you are. You must have an interest in an aspect of the topic or a desire to explore it from a different angle (e.g. the draft in WWII).

Try picking something that really interests you. Pick something you have questions about. Pick something you are willing to read a lot about.

Do not pick something that you have already made up your mind about, unless you are willing to change your mind based on the evidence.

To form a question from your topic, start researching.

Do not start on the internet. Go to the library, and find the best single-volume monograph *by a historian* on your subject. It will be:

- Either most recent or most frequently cited by recent publications on your topic
- Written by a well-respected historian and published by a reputable, probably academic, press
- Contains footnotes or endnotes and bibliography and is at least 200 pages long
- Looks interesting from the Table of Contents

Read this book quickly (in a few days) to get a general overview of your topic.

READ WHEN YOU ARE WIDE AWAKE. READ WITH YOUR BRAIN FULLY ENGAGED.
BE LOOKING FOR AN ANGLE.

Do not take notes on each page. Only make notes at the end of each chapter. Write down the main ideas. Note the most interesting and/or shocking ideas and facts that you remember. Write down questions you have. This will help you focus further research. When you finish, take out a blank sheet of paper and brainstorm. Write whatever comes to mind. Jot down what questions you have. Contemplate the significance of the information.

At this point, you should have a handle on what your question is.

Now, look at their bibliography and footnotes of the monograph to see if their sources would help you answer any of your questions. Get a hold of those books/articles/webpages and start taking notes, finding answers, and developing more questions and theories.

As you research, be thinking of a thesis statement (a succinct answer to your question).

Go where the research takes you. Your thesis statement, research question, and topic angle can change. It is perfectly normal to have to rework your hypothesis, question, and thesis statement.

Do not come up with a thesis statement too early, or if you already have one, be willing to change it as you keep researching.

Finally, the way to answer a question truthfully is to care about finding the truth. The truth about a thing **emerges slowly**. It is also likely to be different from your original hypothesis (if this were not likely, then why do research in the first place?)

So remain open-minded. Argue with yourself. Look at sources that challenge your view. Be willing to be proved wrong. Keep asking questions till you have answers.

For more help: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/history>