

Framing a Research Question (“PBL as a Capstone Strategy” workshop handout)

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I. Elements to which I like to call explicit attention:

- A “topic” is not a question
- Questions come in all different shapes, sizes, and significance
- Every kind of question demands an appropriate method and approach
- So it matters if students can learn to recognize when a potential research question is:
 1. **historical** (as opposed to future-oriented or timeless technical, psychological, ethical/spiritual, or other queries not susceptible to historical investigation)
 2. **manageable** (neither too big nor too small to be addressed in the scope of the writing project to be attempted)
 3. **fruitful** (something that might open up new areas of investigation and understanding – spawn new questions)
 4. **worthy** of anyone’s investigative talents and creative energy (rather than being so simplistic/trivial that obtaining an answer will provide no particularly interesting or valuable insight)

II. Fruitful historical research questions generally help us to understand how and why “change” occurred in the past:

- They often reveal the dynamics of how and why contingency mattered
 - why something surprising/out of the ordinary occurred in a specific time and place, whether due to accident or human agency
- They help us to understand relatively unfamiliar elements of determinism
 - ways in which the prevailing culture and worldview of a different time and place imposed different assumptions or constrained behaviors in a way that would not apply the same way in our world

III. Assignments can be designed to practice and scaffold some of the thought processes that can enhance the student’s ability to frame good research questions

Example: Frame a Project Proposal (essay and working bibliography assignment)

IV. Exams can test whether students are learning how to frame good questions!

Example: Examine the primary source document excerpt provided.

- 1) Contextualize the source in a brief paragraph.
- 2) Generate an interesting historical question that this source inspires you to ask.
- 3) Explain how investigating your question would advance historical understanding which relates to issues that we have studied in this course.

