

Historical Research for Undergraduates

Activity

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This activity focuses on identifying, devising and refining a research question. It is intended for use by students working independently. However, it could be adapted for use in a research methods module or as the basis for an early supervision meeting – for example, as a self-directed activity that is then discussed with a dissertation supervisor. Each of the individual activities below works effectively as a standalone exercise. Some students may only need to work through one exercise in order to come up with a viable research question, while others may benefit from engaging with two or all three of them.

Context and aim

Devising a question (or questions) for your project can be one of the trickiest parts of the research process. You've identified a topic that you find interesting. You've done some secondary reading. You've found some primary sources and had a look at them. So, you've started to get your head around your topic and want to get on with it. But how do you turn that into a 'research question'?

Questions are important because they give our research focus. They allow us to address our primary sources with purpose. They help us to situate our work in relation to the questions that other scholars have posed in the past. In a practical sense, they help us to determine what's relevant and, as importantly, what's less significant and therefore what can be left out, thus saving us wasted time and effort.

Nonetheless, despite their centrality to the process of producing historical research, there is surprisingly little advice on how to generate research questions available for history students. We are used to answering questions that have been set by our teachers and lecturers but are usually much less practised at devising them ourselves.

While textbooks for students on how to do history are clear on the importance of the question to good historical research and spend some time defining what research questions *are*, minimal attention is devoted to *how* students can formulate them in practice. This series of activities is intended to help you get started with the process of identifying and refining a question (or questions) for your research project.

Activity 1: Selecting and refining your topic

This exercise is designed to help you identify and then narrow down your topic. We will then move on to thinking about how you can identify the questions that historians are asking and answering in published works, which can help you to further refine your own question and figure out how it relates to prior scholarship.

Based on your preliminary engagement with primary and secondary sources, which should have led you to identify an area or topic in which you are interested, work through the following prompts. Not all of these are relevant in every case, so don't feel that you have to respond to every bullet point, but try to write a short sentence in response to most of them.

- **The basics:** What are you interested in? Where did it take place – can you locate it geographically? When did it take place? Who was involved (individuals and/or groups)?
- **The sources:** What primary sources are available? Which primary sources do you want to engage with?
- **The scholarship:** How have other scholars approached this topic? What have they concluded about it? What do you think of their views? Do you agree or disagree? How might you build on what they have done?
- **The framing:** Is there a theoretical, methodological or interpretive framework that you would like to apply to the material and/or that other scholars have applied in the past?

Remember – being more specific is better than being general. Once you have a series of short and specific answers to the above questions, you have the raw materials to begin working out your own research question(s).

Activity 2: Identifying other historians' research questions

It may be that the first activity was enough to allow you to generate your research question(s). However, perhaps you want to narrow down your topic further or to develop a clearer idea about how what you will research relates to a specific field of historiography. If this is the case, you could start by identifying the kinds of questions that other historians have asked in their research. There are 'classic' topics to which scholars return time and again, with successive generations adding nuance by examining different elements of what may at first sight appear to be a familiar topic or problem. 'What were the causes of [insert significant political event]?' has spawned countless subsidiary questions and debates on the fall of the Roman Empire, the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the First World War, women's suffrage and so on.

You won't have the scope to tackle the entirety of such classic (and extremely broad) questions in an undergraduate research essay or dissertation, although it might be possible to offer a nuanced take on them by producing a case study focused on a particular period, place, person or source, for instance. But beyond the usual suspects, it can be tricky to identify the questions that other historians are asking. Most academic articles aren't presented as direct responses to explicit questions (unlike many of the essays that you'll have written at university). This activity is designed to help you identify the questions that scholars are seeking to answer in their writing.

Pick an article or a book chapter that is relevant to your project. Now, work through the following process:

- 1 While not often framed as a response to a single question, reading an article or chapter carefully should enable you to begin to get a sense of not just what it is *about*, but what it is *arguing*. Write down your initial idea about what it is arguing in the form of a provisional question.
- 2 If that proves difficult, most articles should provide sufficient information in the introduction to allow you to begin to construct a question (other places to look are the conclusion and transitions within the text, i.e. where one section ends and the next one begins). Update your question based on this close reading.
- 3 To refine your thinking, consider the following prompts and adjust your provisional question further:
 - What is it about? What period, place and/or people does it deal with?
 - What primary sources does it draw on most often?

- What does it seem to be trying to argue? What are the key points?
- What concepts, theories and/or methodologies is it using or responding to?
- What other historians does it build on or react to most frequently?
- How would you characterize what the writer is trying to do? [If they are listing factors, maybe it is a 'why' question. If they seem to be discussing processes, maybe it's a 'how' question. If they seem to be weighing factors against one another to establish relative importance, maybe it's a 'how much' or 'to what extent' question.]

By working through this process, you should be able to develop a more refined idea of the question that the author was seeking to answer. Be warned, however, that not all historical writing responds directly to a research question, so you may have to be creative in your thinking!

- 4 **Optional extension:** after (and *only* after) you have worked through this process independently and come up with your own version of the question, you could try putting the original article into a generative AI tool and prompting it to identify the research question that it thinks the author was trying to answer (see the chapters in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* on 'Sources for Essays', 'Doing History in a Digital World' and 'Reading and Writing History' for more on the appropriate use of AI in historical practice). Then compare the machine-generated response to your own. Do you agree with what it came up with? Does this make you want to adjust your question?

Activity 3: Finding a gap and defining your contribution

This activity is about applying what you have learnt in the first two activities to your own project. It should help you to identify how your research could contribute to an existing historiographical debate by synthesizing your topic, sources and the questions historians have asked, thereby defining your own contribution and research question(s).

Work through the following stages (you do not have to answer every question or respond to every prompt, but try to cover most of them):

- 1 **Create a mini-historiographical matrix.** Base your response on the article or chapter you analysed in Activity 2, and at least two other relevant secondary sources. On one piece of paper or in a table

(so that you can visualize and mark up connections, e.g. through annotation), for each source:

- Identify the research question the author is addressing (use the process outlined in Activity 2, if necessary).
 - Summarize their argument and/or conclusion.
 - Identify the sources and methods they use.
 - Briefly describe how their works relate to one another. Do they refer explicitly to or cite each other? Do they build on, challenge, or diverge from each other?
- 2 **Identify gaps.** Based on your matrix, note down your thoughts in response to the following prompts:
- What themes or perspectives seem to be missing or underexplored?
 - Are there historical actors, places or periods that have been overlooked?
 - Are there methodological, theoretical or interpretive approaches that don't appear to have been applied?
 - Are there any questions that seem to remain open?
- 3 **Define your contribution.** Now, write a short paragraph outlining:
- The specific question or questions that you want to explore (refer back to your response to Activities 1 and 2, if they are helpful).
 - How it relates to existing scholarship.
 - Why it matters – what new insight or perspective might it offer.
 - How your primary sources will help you to answer it.
- 4 **Break down your research question.** Now think about how you might break down your main research question(s) into smaller sub-questions that could be addressed in different sections or chapters. This should make it easier to structure the process of research and writing.
- Try to come up with three or four smaller questions that could contribute to addressing your main question(s).
- 5 **Optional extension.** Use a generative AI tool to help you brainstorm alternative ways to frame your question (see Activity 2 point 4 for a note on responsible use of generative AI). Compare the results with your own and reflect on which framing best captures your intended contribution. Adjust your question(s) as necessary.