A PROCESS FROM START TO FINISH

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Stuck?
The research essay tends to intimidate many student writers. An instructor may call for a paper with a word or page count that causes you to shirk with fear at the thought of writing so much. You may have little to no initial understanding of your subject. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed and have no idea where to begin. Don’t panic! Many students have felt similarly and yet managed to finish with flying colors. Consider the development of a research essay as a step-by-step process. This will make the process less painful and far more manageable. Let’s take the first step together—deciding and focusing on a research question, something that’s essential to pretty much any advanced history paper.

My Experience
As a history major and experienced Writing Fellow, I’m going to share a three-step process for developing research questions that uses examples from my own experience with a paper for HI395 (“History of Civil War America”). The guidelines for this assignment aligned with those for many history research papers:

This project should be focused on answering a historical question related to the American Civil War Era, broadly defined. The paper should be 2,000-2,500 words, exclusive of footnotes and block quotes. Your specific research question will be the main focus of the assignment. A good research question will be interpretive rather than fact-based, and should concentrate on an identified gap in your topic.

Let’s get started!

Step 1: Selecting Your Topic
First of all, find something that interests you. This will make the writing process far more enjoyable and rewarding. As a result, you’ll produce better work. Start by carefully reading primary sources available to you on the subject of your research and search for passages that cater to your interests. Group those passages and consider how they connect and contrast with one another. Look at the work of scholars via secondary sources as well: they’ll be crucial to gaining a sense of counterarguments or even perspectives that align somewhat with your own. When scanning your subject, assume you know nothing. Maintaining an open mind will allow you to gain a fresh, impartial perspective on the material. Challenge your preconceptions! You may not have as extensive knowledge and understanding of a topic as you originally thought. This will make your research even more enlightening and ultimately valuable. Once you have a grasp of a thought-provoking topic that interests you, and have read around a bit, you’ll be well on your way to discerning a research question.

For HI395, I decided to investigate a Civil War topic that is often overlooked by Civil War historians and interests me: the Confederate Navy.
Step 2: What to Look for in Research

So you’ve got a topic ready for exploration, but no idea—yet—on how to craft a research question. Let’s investigate what you should look for within your topic.

- **A ‘gap’**: This is vital. A “gap” is the missing element in existing research. Gaps may be harder to find for some topics than others, and that’s OK. There’s been plenty of scholarship on the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, for example, but there’s obviously still more to be written. Probably less has been done on Warren Harding—so a gap there may be easier to find, though perhaps it will be less compelling. Bottom line: whatever you desire to research, there will be a gap. When looking for it, seek an area that scholars have failed to address extensively or even altogether avoided. Strive to find any points you want to learn more about, and be on the look-out for points that go unelaborated. That’s the “gap”: a space for you to open new questions and take research in a new direction.

- **A complication**: If there are any ambiguities or difficulties that ought to be addressed in the understanding of your topic, those are usually good areas for your research question to mine. That’s where you discover complication: contrast what secondary sources have to say. Spots where scholars differ are ripe for an intervention.

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**Step 3: From Topic and Research to Crafting Your Own Research Question**

Once your topic is narrowed and you’ve examined the shortcomings of prior research, you’re ready to propose your own research question. Here was my final research question for HI395:

*What was the extent of Jefferson Davis’s relationship with the Confederate Navy’s administration as its Commander-in-Chief and how did it change throughout the American Civil War?*

Three additional concepts informed my question—and how I tackled it in my paper—that should also impact yours:

- **Clarity**: Your question should address necessary specifics of the area you intend to explore, such as its time period and the actors involved. A simple way to think of this is by utilizing the 5 W’s—who, what, where, when, and why. Find a balance between generality and complexity that heads off any confusion.

- **Motive (‘So What?’)**: Search for historical connections between actors, places, events, and more. Understanding the importance of such historical connections will allow your research paper to explain why something matters, instead of simply explaining something’s existence.

- **Relevance**: The purpose of your question should meet the requirements of the paper’s prompt. Ensure you have adequate numbers of primary and secondary sources to support your argument.

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Plenty of secondary sources discussed Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory’s leadership in the Confederate Navy, but they rarely discussed Jefferson Davis’s. Meanwhile, many primary sources included communications between Jefferson Davis and Confederate Navy leaders, including Mallory. The only secondary sources that did mention these communications merely referenced them and did not provide any analysis.

The secondary sources that did mention both Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Navy presented slightly different pictures of his leadership—some praised it while others criticized it. The greatest complication lied in primary sources, however. It seemed that, during the war, Davis varied his approach to the Navy. He was far more encouraged by and active with naval operations at the start of the war than towards the conclusion.

I decided to limit my question to the American Civil War, focusing on Davis and his relationship with naval administration. Thus, I did not need to incorporate the military tactics of naval battles, technical specifics of ships, Davis’s personal life after the war, or any other details that may have detracted from an explicit focus on Davis’s leadership of the Navy from 1861 to 1865.

An understanding of Davis’s role in the Confederate Navy provides insight into his command style, the operations of the Confederate Navy, and more. On a grander scale, the paper can speak to questions about the balancing act of a Commander-in-Chief with multiple military branches, military communications, etc.

My research question properly met the requirement guidelines, given its intent to interpret a topic rather than summarize it.