When it comes to writing historical research papers, many students initially focus on prompts—how best to answer a question that is posed for you. Yet in more advanced coursework, the questions you ask and answer must be your own.

Writing in history, fundamentally, is a kind of extended inquiry: historians identify and bridge gaps in our collective understanding by first exploring a topic, then further investigating that topic (and the gap they’ve identified in our understanding of it), and finally prosecuting their case. Asking and pursuing questions is at the heart of this process; then, in your finished writing, you present your findings to your reader.

In reality, though, these methods—exploration, investigation, and prosecution—can be useful to any fact-based research project. As a Military History major, I’m here to help you learn how to ask the right questions—and after that, to follow up and eventually present your findings in compelling ways.

Exploring: Identifying Topics & Asking Questions

Begin by identifying a precise topic: broad enough to explore a variety of potentially worthwhile research questions but narrow enough to promote focused research. For starters, say, barbarians in the fourth-century Roman army. Then, read. This is when you must become an explorer. Read voraciously, open yourself to as many questions and lines of inquiry as possible; let the material and evidence guide your curiosity. Pay attention: what sorts of were you asking yourself during your research? did anything seem out of place? what needs answering?

You will know what it is. When you do, pose a specific, answerable question. For instance: why did the Goths serve in the Roman Army of Theodosius I in his campaign to reunite the Empire? In the humanities, “why” and “how” questions demand the most rigorous analysis and therefore result in the most well-developed essays. Asking the right questions is the basis for producing nuanced, scholarly answers. Once you have your question, it is time to become an investigator...
Investigating: Asking More Specific Component Questions

Your historical question will not be possible to answer straightaway; rather, your answer will ultimately result from how you answer different component questions it entails. Thus, as you become an investigator you must critically analyze the question that emerged from your initial explorations. That is, you’ve established your “how” or “why” question; now, you need to ask and answer related “what” and “who” questions. As you do, you will gather the planks that you’ll eventually construct into your case.

Let’s return to our example. Answering the initial exploratory historical question—why did the Goths serve in the Roman Army of Theodosius I in his campaign to reunite the Empire?—involves some other questions first:

- Who were the Goths?
- What was the Roman military situation in the 390s?
- What were Theodosius and Alaric’s political objectives?
- How did the two parties’ objectives relate to each other?
- What did the Goths hope to gain from an alliance with Rome? Was this motive the principle reason for working with Theodosius?

Notice how each question follows a consistent line of argumentation, even as they require varying degrees of context and historical explanation. As you answering these questions fully, you’ll find the answer to your overarching “why” question. That answer, clearly stated in the concluding section of your paper, will also inform your thesis.

Once you have findings of your investigation—that’s your evidence—you’re ready to take on the role of the prosecutor and make the case for why your answer fills the gap in our historical understanding.

Prosecuting: Answering Questions & Making Your Case, or Thesis

As a prosecutor, your main objective is to take the answers to your historical question and its components and to persuade the reader. You need to make your case, which starts and ends with your thesis. Often you can best organize your thesis, and your argument as a whole, by ordering your answers to your various component questions similarly to how you asked them. This preserves the integrity of your case and makes it much easier to follow. Also: don’t be afraid to be pedantic—to go into more depth than you might think is required.

Returning to our example topic and question, here’s how the thesis—the logical conclusion derived from the evidence you gathered in your investigation, and also a kind of roadmap for your whole paper—might go:

The Goths, a Germanic people from modern-day Ukraine, served in Theodosius I’s much depleted army and won land for themselves in Illyricum while also helping the Emperor reunite the Roman Empire for the last time. Alaric sought land for his people and a Roman military title for himself; he chose to serve the Emperor to realize these objectives. Unable to win land and renown by force, Alaric’s only route to the power he sought was through cooperation with Theodosius.

See how the various components of this thesis correspond to the questions you asked as an investigator? This three-sentence thesis statement also presents a clear and defensible answer to the original historical question.

Now, you could object: isn’t a thesis supposed to be a single sentence? Contrary to popular belief, theses come in all shapes and sizes, especially as papers grow longer. There are no set rules for what your history thesis should be, save one: it should be a defensible and specific answer to your historical question.

PARTING TIPS

- It can be tempting to settle on an answer before you begin your research. Don’t do this: you’ll be tempted only to confirm your hunch, not explore the material.
- Take notes in complete sentences. It will save you tons of time when outlining.
- Always outline. That’s how you ensure that you address every aspect of your thesis in a logical order.

This writing guide was authored by CDT Daniel Berardino (’20) in the context of academic coursework for the Writing Fellows Program at the United States Military Academy. It was informed by Marc Bloch’s The Historian’s Craft (1949, 1953) and incorporates free-use imagery from the public domain. It has been edited and produced by Dr. Jason Hoppe, West Point Writing Program. 2020.