



History Department

**How to Choose a Research
Topic**

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The first time you have the opportunity to choose your own research topic is exciting but can also be a bit daunting. After years of working on topics and questions set by your teachers, it can be difficult to know where to start when you are asked to come up with a project of your own. Answering these questions might help you decide.

What am I really interested in?

The single most important quality that a good research topic needs is that *you* have to be interested in it. Ideally, *very* interested. Some students pick a topic because they think it will get a good mark, or be easy because they already know something about it. But research is actually easiest (and most likely to get a high mark) when you are really engaged with the subject. That interest will help you push yourself to tackle difficult questions, which will really develop your historical skills.

One way to work out what you're most interested in is to think of historical questions to which you want answers. If you're the kind of person who is interested in politics you could research an issue that is currently in the news by asking "what historical events or processes led to this situation?". But history is also about personal life and individual experiences, so you could ask the same kinds of question about your experiences, perhaps by asking how and why your everyday life differs from those of your parents or grandparents – Do you eat different things? Have different feelings, or express them differently? Wear different clothes? Enjoy different entertainment? Have different expectations about relationships, jobs or the future? Any of those questions could lead you into fascinating research ideas.

Another good way to choose a topic is to think about the kinds of research it would entail and ask yourself whether you enjoy that kind of research. If a topic really requires detailed statistical analysis of a mass of data but you hate doing statistics – choose a different topic. If what you really love is reading long, Victorian novels – or watching 1970s sitcoms – choose a topic that lets you work with those sources.

What's a good question?

Good historical questions usually ask "why", not just "how" or "when": a *why* question encourages analysis or argument (for example, deciding which were the most important factors that explain why something happened). By contrast, *how* or *when* questions may become lists of dates and events, with no argument. The worst kind of question is one that makes a statement and simply says "discuss" – that really encourages unfocussed waffling – so try to make your question as precise as possible by choosing one that could (potentially at least) have a definite answer.

Every historian runs out of words before they run out of things to say. Part of the art of research is asking questions that can be answered with the number of words you have available.

Try asking yes/no questions, instead of open-ended ones. For example, “was poverty the most important cause of the revolution?” encourages you to develop an argument (yes it was or no it wasn’t, with examples and counter-examples on both sides). By contrast, “what were the factors that led to the revolution?” might tempt you to just produce a list.

Of course, hardly any interesting historical questions can be answered yes or no, but starting with a question that has two clear sides usually leads to a rich, subtle argument in which at least two different possible explanations have been fully explored and analysed.

Finding some answers

Obviously a good question is only the start – you also need a good answer. The first step is to identify relevant sources.

Secondary sources: It’s often best to start with these (articles, books, etc., written by other historians) – so that you understand what’s already been said about your subject.

- When you’re reading secondary sources it’s important to make notes, but don’t just record key names, dates and similar information. It’s important to pay attention to the historian’s argument.
- Don’t just copy out other people’s ideas or quote them directly – the best way to understand an argument is to try summarising it in your own words.
- Look at how the historian supported their argument: which other historians have they cited (and are they agreeing with or disputing their arguments)? What kinds of evidence have they used, and how have they used it?
- You need to look at more than one historian’s arguments: make sure you read different people with different opinions and decide whose you find most persuasive (and ask yourself why).
- Analysing these details will help you develop your own arguments, and also help you understand how to support your case (and how to criticise other people’s).

Primary sources: Once you have a sense of the existing history of your topic, it’s time to hunt out some original historical materials.

- Try starting with the ones that are mentioned in the secondary sources you have read – then try reading (viewing, listening to, etc.) those primary sources for yourself and decide whether they really support the argument that you’ve been reading.
- Look for different kinds of documents. If the history of your topic has always relied on newspaper reports, for example, you could ask what highbrow magazines published, or novelists, or what people wrote in their diaries, letters or fanzines.

- Documents are not the only sources. Written records are usually the easiest to find and use, but audio-visual sources (films, photographs, paintings, sketches, cartoons, radio broadcasts, adverts, oral history interviews, music, podcasts, blogs, webpages, etc.) can all provide vital evidence and can often suggest new questions, methods and approaches. The same is true for objects, places, landscapes – just about anything can be a historical source. Use your imagination and try to think of sources that haven't been used to address your question, or which could be used in new ways.
- Digital sources often offer improved access to all kinds of material that used to be hard to get at, but they also allow you to search, explore and analyse material in all kinds of new ways. A vast database of online newspapers, for example, could allow you to search for a specialised topic that was only covered very occasionally; that could allow you to investigate questions you could never hope to address with a library of physical newspapers.
- Rethinking sources. A source may have been created for a specific reason, to investigate a specific question, but doesn't limit the uses that historians can make of it. For example, a few years ago, hundreds of naval logbooks were digitised to investigate climate change (because naval officers recorded the weather in their logs every day), but the resulting database was then used by naval historians and by people researching their ancestors. Every source contains all kinds of hidden possibilities just waiting for someone to ask the right question.
- Most important of all: look for alternatives. If your historian has only cited sources written by men, look for some by women; if they're all written by educated, white Europeans, try to find some written by people with very different backgrounds, and so on. Look for sources that reveal people, voices, ideas or experiences that have not received much historical attention. Historical arguments often rely on a specific range of sources, so extending that range can produce fresh perspectives.

Where should I start?

Starting with what has already been written on a topic is often sensible, but it can sometimes be boring. Sometimes you find a primary source that fascinates you: it could be a letter, an old magazine, a place you visited, a song you heard, a battered family album, or a mysterious object you found on the beach or in your grandparents' attic. Almost anything can make you ask what's this? How did it get here? What does it mean? – and those are all possible starting points for research.

If you make a discovery, start researching straight away: search online, look it up in the library and talk to our librarians, or email archivists and researchers at other institutions. If you've no idea where to start, talk to your tutor; if they can't help you, they can usually suggest someone who can. Sometimes, you find there's not much you can say – that's disappointing, but good researchers know when to abandon a topic.

Sometimes your discovery might not be suitable for the current project (you might need to save it for a later one), but it may lead you into areas of research whose very existence you had never suspected.

How much can I do?

Nine times out of ten, a student's first idea for their 3,000 word essay is rich and complex enough to make two or three PhD theses. But don't give up – you just need to focus on one manageable, focussed aspect of that larger question. For example, you could pick a narrower time frame, or geographical scope, or select a couple of specific examples from among the sources. Sometimes a small range of carefully selected sources may help, but make sure they can be meaningfully compared and contrasted. For example, comparing up-market British newspapers from the 1920s with mass-market Egyptian newspapers from the 1980s, might not make sense. Probably better to select one country and/or one period and then compare a couple of mass-market titles with a couple of up-market ones.

Having a clear argument usually helps you choose your examples, so if you find yourself thinking you must read thousands of different sources that's usually a sign that you haven't thought enough about your argument.

Finally...

- Make sure you discuss your topic with your tutors very early on; it's never too soon to go to office hours and bounce a few ideas around.
- Remember: there are no silly questions. Most important, original historical research starts with somebody asking a question that previous historians thought wasn't worth asking.