

Chapter 4

Good Answers Begin with Good Questions

- Good students have answers; great ones have questions
 - A good question is answerable in more than one way
 - A good question resonates beyond its immediate subject
 - A good question opens windows on past and present
 - A good question is answerable
- So what do I ask?

For a lot of people, getting an essay assignment from a teacher is one of the less pleasant moments in academic life. For one thing, it represents a looming burden on your time and energy: even a fun essay (which some students regard as a contradiction in terms) is going to be a lot of work. But what may be worse is the sheer sense of anxiety: How are you going to do this? What does the teacher want? Will you have anything to say? And if so, can you really fill up X number of pages on the topic?

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Perhaps inevitably, your initial – and, perhaps, unwavering – response to getting an assignment will be to focus on your *answer* to the essay question. This is as likely to be true of a specific query that your teacher gives you as it is of a more open-ended one where you choose your topic (a scenario you may regard as even more stressful). In fact, of course, your answer is going to matter a great deal, and it is entirely understandable, even legitimate, for you to focus on that. Besides, one of the best ways to discharge anxiety about a looming undertaking is to dive right into it. But in this chapter I'm asking you to break that circuit and to pause for a moment, to step back. I want you to resist that impulse to begin researching and instead linger on a subject that may seem like a detour at best and a distraction at worst. That subject is questions – what they are, why they matter, and, in particular, what good history questions should do – which, by the way, is something for which you should hold your teacher accountable.

Good Students Have Answers; Great Ones Have Questions

There are few things more central to the life of the mind than the ability to pose a good question. Good students have answers; great ones have questions. This is as true of mathematicians (what would it mean to have a numeric concept of nothing, of zero?) as it is of painters (what should a picture be now that we have photography?). Good questions have the power to turn meaningless *information* into meaningful *answers*. And while answers have the power to change *what* you think, questions have the power to change *how* you think – or, even better, to *make* you think.

The power of questions takes on an even greater intensity in our lifetimes, a period sometimes dubbed the “Information Age.” Though you may not often think about it this way, you now have more data at your fingertips than the wisest sages of earlier times ever dreamed possible. Actually, you have more data at your fingertips than many people born before 1960 ever dreamed possible. To be sure, much of that information is of poor quality, if not useless (see Appendix E for

more on assessing Internet sources). But it's been getting steadily better, and there's good reason to think that the contents of entire university libraries will someday be open to you via remote wireless access from a laptop computer, as will books as they roll off the presses (a phrase that may soon change from a factual description to a cozy metaphor). As many analysts of contemporary life have observed, the key to success in your life, academically and otherwise, is likely to be less about finding information than in knowing how to organize and use it. And the key to that will be asking yourself good questions, whether or not your teacher is doing so as well.

Nowhere is the role of a good question more decisive than in the field of history. If sources are its life blood, then questions are its heart, the engine that drives it. Sometimes those questions are broadly philosophic, like the proverbial one of whether men make the times or times make the man. Others are perennials that are engaged over the course of generations, like the question of what caused the fall of the Roman empire, or whether the British did more harm than good in their administration of India. And still others are highly specific, even idiosyncratic, such as: "What do the Inquisition records of an erratic sixteenth-century miller tell us about the inner life of ordinary people otherwise lost to history?" – the topic of Carlo Ginzburg's pathbreaking 1976 study *The Cheese and the Worms*.¹

But what is it that makes a good question good? For starters, here are three criteria:

1. **A good question is answerable in more than one legitimate way.** In the humanities, at least, good questions tend to be open-ended. There are cases where history resembles science, and a good question results in a single, unambiguous answer. "Did Julius Rosenberg, who was put to death in 1953 for treason, really cooperate with the Soviet Union, as alleged?" The answer, we now know (because after the Soviet Union collapsed its archives

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne. C. Tedeschi (1976; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

were opened) is “Yes.” For scholars of the Cold War, this was an important discovery. But there may be less to it than meets the eye – or perhaps it would be better to say that this answer only raises other, less straightforward, questions. Was Rosenberg’s behavior with the Soviets truly treasonous? If it was, did it merit the death penalty? And what about his wife, Ethel, who was also executed? And their innocent sons, who grew up without them: Was their parents’ death fair to them? (Is that a relevant question?) Scholars continue to engage these matters even after Rosenberg’s role has been established. The mere fact that they *can* be engaged, that reasonable people come to different conclusions, is a big part of the appeal of history, why people choose to do it. But not the only reason.

2. **A good question resonates beyond its immediate subject and invites consideration of broader historical issues.** “Was Napoleon Bonaparte a tall man?” is not a particularly good historical question. For one thing, it’s not open-ended: We know that compared with his contemporaries, at least, he was not. For another, no answer is likely to tell us much, with the possible exception of whether knowing would suggest anything about the role of height in the making of political stature (psychologists use the phrase “Napoleon complex” to refer to people who try to compensate for their lack of height with grand deeds). But a question about the nature and durability of Napoleon’s political reforms in France is another matter. Your answer to *that* question – let’s say it’s something like “He illustrates the salutary effects of centralized power in bringing about decisive social change” – is likely to have implications that take us far beyond Napoleon, France, and the nineteenth century. The answer will be revealing because the underlying question is important and relevant. We might, for example, apply any answers we derive from a question about Napoleon to earlier French history or the history of another nation at the same time.
3. **A good question opens windows not only on the past, but on the present as well.** This point follows logically from the previous one, but deserves separate consideration. Some historians

caution against the danger of reading too much into history, and of drawing misplaced “lessons” from the past that get misapplied to the present (I mentioned this back in Chapter 1, in talking about the “Munich analogy,” which led American policymakers to try and avoid the mistakes of the Second World War, only to plunge into the quagmire of the Vietnam War). To be sure, any sophisticated student of history is going to be aware that people of the past are both similar to and different than those of today. And when I say “different,” I don’t mean a simple inversion, like a suggestion that medieval Roman Catholics were serious about their religion while Roman Catholics today are not. My guess is that medieval Catholics were serious, as we understand the term, in some ways and not others, just as some Catholics today care a great deal about particular issues (like, say, abortion) that didn’t really figure prominently in everyday medieval life. All this said, unless we see *some* connection between the past and the present, derive some notion of the way we might live in knowledge of the way others have lived, then history is simply not going to be particularly interesting. That’s another reason why the question of Napoleon’s height isn’t especially compelling: even if it was a debatable question, it would be a moot one, because the answer wouldn’t be relevant to our lives (except perhaps for small people with large, imperial ambitions).

There is a fourth criterion in what makes a good question, and for our purposes it is the most important, because it is the most directly relevant in the daunting process of writing a good essay: **A good question is answerable.** This is an assertion that is relative and needs to be put in context. In the broadest sense, the proverbial question of whether men make the times or times make the man is not a particularly good one, because there is really no way of knowing with much confidence, though one might make a pretty good case study through a particularly vivid illustrative example. Other questions may be less philosophical, but so complicated to answer that a historian will spend the better part of his life trying to do so, as the legendary biographer Robert A. Caro is currently doing in his multivolume work

trying to get to the bottom of the question as to who the thirty-sixth president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, really was.²

You, by contrast, are probably thinking in terms of weeks or days (hopefully not hours). Still, the single most common mistake students make in beginning an essay assignment is in casting too wide a net in trying to answer a question. They'll want to tackle the legacy of racism in Africa generally rather than looking at a specific colonial experience in a specific place at a specific time. They'll want to answer the question of the legacy of the 1960s in American culture without specifying a particular subset of people in the sixties. This is often the result of misplaced anxiety about whether there will really be enough to say when trying to answer a tightly focused question. Yes, as I noted earlier, a scarcity of good sources can be a real problem in historical inquiry. But a good question will take that into account and frame the possibilities as well as the limits in a way that makes the whole process of producing an essay easier.

So What Do I Ask?

Where do you get good questions? The answer is: from your sources (see Chapter 3). Good questions do not materialize out of thin air. Sources, which we think of as material that provides information, are also crucial in providing questions. Only by delving into sources – into researching – can a question really come into focus. And as often as not, a good question is the result of a *process*. You examine a source and generate a question (What is this person really saying?); read some more and revise that question (maybe what I really should be asking is: What *isn't* this person saying?); read some more and discard

² Robert A. Caro's massive biography, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, is currently in three volumes, all first published by Random House: *The Path to Power* (1982); *Means of Ascent* (1991); and *Master of the Senate* (2002). As of this writing Caro is completing a fourth volume, on Johnson's presidency, *The Passage of Power* (2012). They are magnificent books, the finest flower of historical biography – perhaps not coincidentally, written by a man who was trained as a journalist.

that question (forget about the first person – what’s this other guy saying?); read some more and perhaps resurrect the question in a new form (actually, I now see that the first one’s silence speaks volumes); and so on.

So in an important sense you’re right if you’re impatient and want to jump in as soon as you get an essay assignment. But the crucial point, one that’s subtle but truly decisive, is the *way* you jump in. The trick at the outset is to not be on the lookout for answers, but rather for intriguing, answerable, resonant questions. This is true even when you’re handed a question by a teacher: In an important sense you’ve got to make it your own by tweaking, revising, or challenging it in a satisfying way. (We’ll talk more about this when we discuss defining terms in Chapter 9.) Doing this will not only result in more creative and satisfying work. It will also make the whole process easier and more rewarding.

One last point: coming up with questions takes time. Again: it’s a process more than a task. Trying to write an essay all at once is a mistake, because you short-circuit that process. Dipping into things, letting your brain digest them on a back channel while you put away your laundry, take a shower, or go out for Chinese food (where you may or may not discuss them with a friend) is really central to the experience. I’m not necessarily suggesting that you do *more* work, that you let an essay take over your life. I am saying that slow roast is better than fried.

Now let’s talk about how to begin researching questions *and* answers.