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## Step 1 – Framing a question

Historical research begins with choosing a topic or subject and then focusing on a specific question concerning the topic. “What influenced President Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb?” “To what extent did the United States’ concerns with the Soviet Union influence the decision to drop the bomb?” At the core of the historian’s craft is the effort to increase our knowledge about the past. The expansion of historical knowledge is largely the process of asking and answering questions to the best of our abilities. This is not to say that the process ends when an historian offers an answer to a question. Rather, historians are constantly testing the answers other historians have previously put forward. We reassess constantly. You might well want to reassess the view that some historians have taken that dropping the atomic bomb was necessary to save American casualties that would have resulted from an invasion of the Japanese home islands.

There may be some confusion with the terms “topic” and “question.” In this guide we treat the terms as two separate items. Often instructors and professors use the term “topic” when they actually mean the question that is being researched. Whichever term is used, it still is important to know the difference. As used in this handbook, “topic” refers to the subject of the paper. A “topic” is usually rather broad, such as the development or use of the atomic bomb; it describes in a general fashion the historical period or subject you wish to explore. Once you have a topic in mind, you can then proceed to frame a question.

A question must be framed *before* you begin your research. Without first having a question in mind, research is impossible. Let’s say you are interested in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and with no specific question about the crisis in mind you run to the

library and plunge into your research. You pull a copy of Mark J. White's *The Cuban Missile Crisis* off the shelf, and you sit down with your note cards ready to take notes. As the title suggests, the entire book is on the Cuban missile crisis. What do you take notes on? Every chapter?

Suppose, however, that you initially spend some time framing a question. After reading an encyclopedia article or a textbook description of the crisis, you began to ask why it was that President Kennedy decided to blockade Cuba rather than invade the island. You ask "What caused President Kennedy to blockade rather than invade Cuba during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis?" This time you go to the library and look at *The Cuban Missile Crisis* and you know to look only for those sections of the book that deal with why President Kennedy decided to invade. All other parts of the book are either irrelevant or should merely be examined for a broader understanding of the context of your question.

So, how do you go about framing a question? You begin by defining an historical field, that is, the parameters of your research. Think of historical research as a game. All games need a playing field. If you step outside the playing field during the game, you are out of bounds and the game stops. An historical field defines the area in which you are going to permit yourself to research. Step out of that field and the game stops -- you are out of bounds.

You will more than likely have three borders within which you will be operating: 1) course subject, 2) study area, and 3) time period.

The first border, course subject, is rather obvious. If you are taking a course on the Renaissance and Reformation, you are not going to write a paper about whether or not

the United States should have dropped the atomic bomb. Likewise, if you are enrolled in a course entitled "England Under the Tudors and Stuarts," you will not be writing on some aspect of Napoleon's military feats.

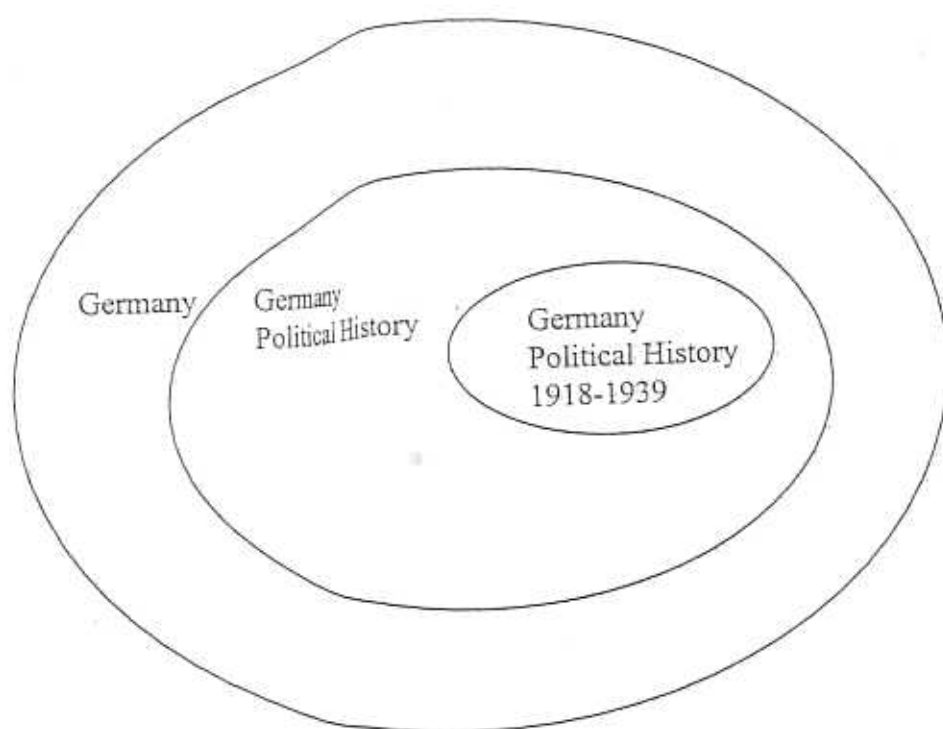
The second border of your historical field is study area. Historians traditionally deal in broad study areas. The most familiar are:

- military history (soldiers, arms, or war)
- economic history (production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services)
- political history (government or the conduct of government)
- intellectual history (ideas and their development)
- social history (society, the interaction of individuals or groups or the welfare of members of society)
- diplomatic history (international relations)

Finally, an historical field also has temporal bounds. Like a game, the subject of your research should have a beginning and an end. You will need a period of time in which you will focus your research. You might limit yourself to a period of history such as the "Renaissance" or the "Enlightenment" or "Reconstruction." More than likely, however, you will want to limit yourself to an even more specific time period: the Renaissance in Italy, the life of Isaac Newton, or Alabama from 1865 to 1871.

Think of the historical field as a target or a set of smaller and smaller concentric circles. Suppose you are taking the course "The Social and Cultural History of Germany." Your widest circle would be Germany. You are not interested in things

outside of the subject of your course. Your next circle might include political history, that is history related to the conduct of government. Religious history and other topic areas bore you to tears. Finally, you decide to narrow your research even further by deciding that the time period you are interested in is the interwar years, 1918-1939. Schematically, your historical field would look like this:



Once you define an historical field, you need to ask a question about a player or event on that field. "Players" is defined broadly -- people, movements, organizations, classes, parties or any part of the action. Suppose in our historical field -- Germany, political history, 1919-1939 -- you selected as a player the Nazi Party. Next, you would consider the identified player or event in light of the standard categories of questions historians ask. The three most common are: 1) causes, 2) effects, and 3) change over

time. Historians are always interested in why an event happened -- its cause -- or what happened as a result of an event -- its effect. Not surprisingly, historians are interested in time. What changed or did not change over a period of time and why? You might ask, "What caused the growth of the Nazi Party?" or "What were the effects of early Nazi racial laws?" or "What changes occurred in the Nazi Party during the 1920s and 1930s?" Each of these questions falls within our historical field and will lead you toward valid and instructive research.

Most importantly, in formulating a question, keep in mind your interest in the subject. One of the worst reasons for choosing a question is the assumption that your professor will be especially interested in the answer. Historians all have different interests. You are an historian, and more than likely you will have interests different from your professor's. Yet historians, including your professor, want to learn answers to new questions. More important, you should choose a question in which you have a general interest. Your curiosity, not your instructor's will have to fire the engines to do the research. If you are truly interested in the answer to your question, you will enjoy your research, and the hours you spend in the library will fly by.

Most instructors *require* you to have your question approved before you begin your research. Even if not required, you should discuss your question with your instructor before research begins. It may be too narrow, though questions are usually too broad rather than too narrow. Too broad a question will leave you drowning in a sea of information. A question such as "What were the causes of the First World War?" would take volumes to answer. Once you have a question, you can assess whether there are sources adequate for some answer. You may realize that not enough has been written to

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answer it adequately. In most instances, plenty of sources are readily available to answer most undergraduate questions.

You should keep in mind the limited amount of time you will have for your research project. Working with your professor, you should be able to find a question broad enough to have produced the research to answer it adequately, yet narrow enough to be answered in the time and space allowed.

Finally, keep in mind that the framing of a question is a process that almost certainly will continue until your research is completed. Your question should be flexible enough to change as you discover more about it. The first signal that a question needs modification is the lack of evidence to answer it. Perhaps what you originally thought was an important question is something other historians have found to be of little relevance. Your question may have included a false assumption. Suppose your question is "What role did Winston Churchill play in forging the terms of the 1938 Munich agreement?" Early in your research, you would discover that Churchill had absolutely nothing to do with the terms of this agreement. You may change your question to "What role did Churchill play in opposing the Munich agreement?" More than likely, your change will not be as drastic as this. All you will probably need to do is "fine tune."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## CHECKLIST

Step <sup>1</sup> - Framing a question

## \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Historical field defined

A. course subject: \_\_\_\_\_

B. topic area (check those areas you intend to research)

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. military history (relating to soldiers, arms, and war)

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. economic history (relating to the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services)

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. political history (relating to government or the conduct of government)

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. intellectual history (relating to ideas and their development)

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. social history (relating to society, the interaction of individuals or groups or the welfare of members of society)

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. diplomatic history (relating to international relations)

## \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Player or event chosen

A. Player or event: \_\_\_\_\_

## \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "Category" of question chosen

A. Causes: \_\_\_\_\_

B. Effects: \_\_\_\_\_

C. Change over time: \_\_\_\_\_

D. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Question stated

A. Question: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_