Week 6

Research Questions
What is a research question?

What is a research question?
A research question is a...
  - clear
  - focused
  - concise
  - complex
  - arguable

...question around which you center your research. You should ask a question about an issue that you are genuinely curious and/or passionate about.
Why is a research question essential to the research process?

- Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process.
- The specificity of a well-developed research question helps writers avoid the “all-about” paper and work toward supporting a specific, arguable thesis.
1. Choose an interesting general topic. Even directed academic research should focus on a topic in which the writer is at least somewhat personally invested. Writers should choose a broad topic about which they genuinely would like to know more. An example of a general topic might be “Slavery in the American South” or “Films of the 1930s.”

2. Do some preliminary research on your general topic. Do a few quick searches in current periodicals and journals on your topic to see what’s already been done and to help you narrow your focus. What questions does this early research raise?
From Broad Topics to Focused Ones

- a topic is too broad if you can state it in 3 to 6 words
  - the history of commercial aviation
    - There is a history of commercial aviation. (weak claim)
  - the role of race in elections
    - Race plays a role in elections. (weak claim)
How to fix it? **Narrow your topics by adding verbs that express actions or relationships**

- the history of commercial aviation → The contribution of the military in developing DC-3 in the early years of commercial aviation.

- In the early years of commercial aviation, the military contributed to the way DC-3 developed.

- It’s a claim that is still THIN but much stronger.
Another one...

- Race plays a role in elections → the influence of race on voter turnout in the last 4 presidential elections.
- Voter turnout in the last 4 presidential elections has been influenced by racial demographics.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO NARROW TOO MUCH!
Step 3: Consider your audience

For most college papers, your audience will be academic, but always keep your audience in mind when narrowing your topic and developing your question. Would that particular audience be interested in this question?
Step 4: Start asking questions

Start asking yourself open-ended “how” and “why” questions about your general topic.

“How did the slave trade evolve in the 1850s in the American South?”

“Why were slave narratives effective tools in working toward the abolishment of slavery?”
From Focused Topics to Questions

ASK ABOUT:
- the history of your topic
- the structure and composition of your topic
- how your topic is categorized
- turn positive questions into negative ones
- ask “what if?” and other speculative questions
- ask questions that build on agreement with your sources
- ask questions that reflect disagreement with your sources
Step 5: Evaluate your question

After you’ve got a question or even a couple of questions down on paper, evaluate these questions to realize if they would be effective research questions or if they need more revising.

- **Is your research question clear?** With so much research available on any given topic, research questions must be as clear as possible in order to be effective in helping the writer direct his or her research.

- **Is your research question focused?** Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.

- **Is your research question complex?** Research questions should not be answerable with a simple “yes” or “no” or by easily-found facts. They should, instead, require both research and analysis on the part of the writer.
Sample Research Questions

Why are social networking sites harmful?
- How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on such social networking sites as MySpace and Facebook?

What is the effect on the environment from global warming?
- How is glacial melting affecting penguins in the Arctic Circle?

How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?
- What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?
Hypothesize. After you’ve come up with a question, think about what the path you think the answer will take. Where do you think your research will take you? What kind of argument are you hoping to make/support? What will it mean if your research disputes your planned argument? At this step, you are well on your way to having a focus for your research, constructing a thesis, and then writing out your argument in a paper.
From Question(s) to Significance

So What? → Why conduct this research in the first place?

3 Steps:
1. Name Your Topic
   “I am trying to learn about (work on, studying) ________________
2. Add an indirect question
   “because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how ________”
3. Answer “So What?” by motivating your question
   “in order for my reader to understand how, why, or whether ________________”
Example

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals.

2. because I want to find out whether the earliest peoples hunted them to extinction.

3. in order to help my reader understand whether native peoples lived in harmony with nature or helped destroy it.
Your Goal is to EXPLAIN

1. what you are writing about – *I am working on the topic of*…
2. what you *don’t* know about it – *because I want to find out*…
3. why you want your reader to know and care about it – *in order to help my reader understand better*…