

There's difference between "bad" and "good" questions. **Good** questions are:

<p>Debatable That also means they <i>have been debated</i>. You will need to present a debate, either among historians or among people at the time. You may take a position on the debate yourself.</p>	<p>Narrow You will need to be able to give a credible answer to your question in a concise format. Don't take on a question that is too open-ended.</p>	<p>Significant There must be <i>something important at stake</i> in the answer, not just to you—because you're curious—but in terms of large historical issues. Think "consequences."</p>	<p>Researchable You will both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources should include books and scholarly journal articles. <i>Do not limit your research entirely to websites.</i></p>
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More about bad and good questions:

Bad question	Good question
Just rewords a topic	Helps you choose evidence
Can be answered from simple factual digging; <i>your knowledge gap doesn't make a paper</i>	Gives you a position on which to take a judgment and make an argument
Too big	Forces you to analyze and think critically
Too vague	Suggests an outline
Morally one-sided	Sends you to a debate you can present and join
Counterfactual—can't be disproven	Suggests what primary evidence to interpret
No accessible primary sources	Suggests what secondary evidence you'll need
Suggests you write a "report." Instead: recall you're an historian -- you are NOT doing a simple chronology or an isolated re-creation.	Answers others' curiosity--including people who know the subject--not just yours

Examples of topics, bad questions, and better questions

<p>Topic: <i>Causes of the American Civil War</i></p> <p>Bad question: What caused the American Civil War? [too big]</p> <p>Pretty good question: What were the most important causes of the Civil War? [allows judgment, argument]</p>
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<p>Topic: <i>The Magna Carta</i></p> <p>Bad question: What was the Magna Carta? [answerable with simple facts]</p> <p>Pretty good question: What forces led to the Magna Carta? [fairly easily answered, but possibly debatable]</p> <p>Pretty good question: What was the impact of the Magna Carta? [immediate impact is pretty factual, but a longer view allows some debate]</p> <p>Better question: Who benefited most from the Magna Carta? [requires judgment, analysis to answer, which fosters an argument]</p> <p>Better question: Was the Magna Carta a precursor to Parliament? [yes or no question, but the answer requires definitions of terms and judgment] – could be improved to: "How did Magna Carta influence the creation of Parliament?"</p> <p>Good questions: How did Magna Carta influence leading American revolutionaries who (revolted in the 1770s, or drafted the US Constitution)?</p>

Topic: *Colonialism in Africa***Bad question:** What European countries had colonies in Africa? [simple factual question]**Bad question:** What would have happened if Africa had never been colonized? [counterfactual—your answer can't be disproven, so it's not factually debatable]**Half-decent question:** Why did some European countries have more African colonies than others? [requires judgment about European countries, but hard to answer from primary sources in 6-8 pages]**Bad question:** Why did the world allow Europe to rape Africa? [too moralistic, one-sided]**Better question:** What was the impact of colonization on African people? [similar to above, but allows weighing, even if a morally firm answer is ultimately reached]**Topic:** *Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment***Bad question:** What was the relationship between Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment? [vague]**Better question:** Was Benjamin Franklin typical of the American Enlightenment? [allows judgment]**Better question:** What features of the Enlightenment does Benjamin Franklin illustrate? [allows judgment]**Better question:** In what ways does Benjamin Franklin not illustrate the Enlightenment? [allows judgment]

Notice that the **questions are in present tense if they are asking about what we learn now** from a particular inquiry **and in past tense if the answers happened in the past.**

Good questions fall into a few categories, which often overlap or co-exist:

- causes (or a ranking of causes)
- effects/impact (possibly also ranked)
- contextualization
- compare and contrast
- change over time; continuity over time
- interactions
- illustration of larger trend

For instance, say you wanted to use **Civil War nurses** for your topic. Possible research questions would be

- a. **What were some of the pre-existing gender roles and expectations that shaped the experience of nursing?** That's the *cause* side of a *cause and effect* question; you could also call it a *contextualization* question, fitting a narrow phenomenon or event into its context.
- b. **Did the experience of nursing in the Civil War cause lasting changes in those women's lives, in women's professional opportunities, in gender relations?** That's the *effect* side of a *cause and effect* question.
- c. **Did the experience of nursing in the Civil War vary for Northern vs. Southern women?** That's a *compare and contrast* question.
- d. **How did the experience of nursing change from the beginning of the war to the end?** That's a *change over time* question.
- e. **Under what circumstances did women nurses take on doctor-level duties? Were only women serving as nurses? Were only white women hired? Under what circumstances were non-white women hired?** These are analytical questions about how institutions and events interacted.
- f. **What does the development of nursing during the Civil War tell us about gender relationships even today?** That's an *illustration of larger trend* question.