

Posing Inquiry Questions Handout

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Generating Questions

In this module, “Hope, Despair and Memory” is a starter or “seed text” that helps generate potential topics and issues that drive the research process. Issues and topics that are surfaced in the text will be used to pose inquiry questions. These inquiry questions help illuminate different potential areas of investigation within a research topic. When generating inquiry questions, it is often a good idea to brainstorm as many as possible before selecting and refining the richest ones. Here are several guiding questions to help you get started:

- How is the topic defined?
- What are its major aspects?
- Where did it originate?
- What are its causes and implications?
- What is its history?
- What other topics/issues is it connected to or associated with?
- What are its important places, things, people, and experts?

Selecting and Refining Questions

Once the brainstorming process is completed, it is important to review and select the strongest questions generated. Use these questions to assist with selecting and refining the strongest inquiry questions:

Are you genuinely interested in answering your question?

There is a lot of work involved in research, and genuine interest motivates the research process. The most effective questions are about issues and topics that are interesting to individual researchers and what they consider to be valuable information.

Can your question truly be answered through your research?

Some questions are unanswerable (Are there aliens on Jupiter?) or take years to answer (What is the meaning of life?). An effective inquiry question must be realistic and researchable.

Is your question clear? Can you pose your question in a way that you and others understand what you are asking?

Clear inquiry questions are straightforward and not confusing. If the question has two parts it may be better to separate the parts to form two new questions.

What sort of answers does your question require?

Questions that can be answered with a simple YES or NO generally do not make effective inquiry questions. Effective inquiry questions should support deep investigation that may even lead to multiple answers, and more questions. For example, the question “What are the causes of war?” could lead to questions about how these causes are defined and research about different reasons for going to war throughout history.

Do you already know what the answer is?

Effective inquiry questions are questions that cannot be answered immediately. The research process involves inquiry, finding more information about a question, and developing a perspective based on the evidence discovered and this cannot happen if the question is already answered or too simplistic. For example there is a big difference between the questions, “Has the United States participated in any wars?” (an easily answered question that requires little research) and, “What has been the impact of war on the United States?” (a question that would require a lot of research).

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