*U.S. History (Gr. 11) New West Charter Instructor: Ms. Hynes*

**Developing a Good Research Question and Thesis**

Developing a good research question is one of the first critical steps in the research process.  The research question, when appropriately written, will guide the research project and assist in the construction of a logical argument.  The research question should be a clear, focused question that summarizes the issue that the researcher will investigate.

**How to Develop Good Research Questions:**

* Researchers should begin by identifying a broader subject of interest that lends itself to investigation. ***George Washington – What was his long-term impact on the presidency?***
* The next step is to do preliminary research on the general topic to find out what research has already been done and what literature already exists.  ***How much research has been done on Washington’s influence on the office and conventions of the president?***  What questions have already been answered?  Is there a unique area that is yet to be investigated or is there a particular question that may be worth replicating in a new study?
* Then begin to narrow the topic by asking open-ended ***“what”***, ***"how"*** and ***"why"*** questions.  For example, a researcher might want to ask:
  + ***What precedents did Washington set that many other presidents followed?***
  + ***How did the American public react to the model of presidential behavior that Washington set out?***
  + ***Why specifically is President Washington still so revered in American history***?

Create a list of potential questions for consideration and decide which ones provide the best opportunity for exploration.

* Finally, evaluate the question or questions by using the following list of guidelines:
  + Is the research question one that is of interest to the researcher and potentially to others?
  + Is the research question researchable? Consider the available time frame, the resources you have, and the questions themselves realistically.
  + Is the research question too broad or too narrow?

**Examples of Research Questions:**

Considering the information above, the following provides examples of flawed research questions as well as questions that are well-designed:

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| **Too narrow:**   *Did the American public approve of Washington’s decision to serve only two terms?*  This is too narrow because it can be answered very simply, with little to no analysis or evaluation.  Questions that can be answered with a "yes" or a "no" should also typically be avoided. | **Less narrow:**  *How did the American public react to Washington’s decision to serve only two terms, and what was the rationale behind that reaction?*  This question demonstrates the correct amount of specificity and the results would provide the opportunity for an argument to be formed. |
| **Unfocused and too broad:**  *What impact did George Washington have on the conventions of the presidency?*  This question is so broad that research methodology would be very difficult and the question is too broad to be discussed in a typical research paper. | **More focused:**  *What kinds of decisions did Washington make that future presidents saw fit to imitate?*  This question has a very clear focus for which data can be collected, analyzed, and discussed. |
| **Too simple:**  *Was George Washington a much-loved president among the American people?*  This information can be obtained without the need to collect unique data. Washington is called “Father of the Nation”. He’s on the $1 bill. It’s already pretty clear that people loved him. The question could be answered without even a simple online search and does not provide an opportunity for analysis. | **More Complex:**  *What reaction did Washington’s decision to serve two terms engender in the American people, and how did his actions influence the behavior of future presidents?*  This question is more complex and requires both investigation and evaluation which will lead the research to form an argument that may be discussed. |

These research questions should now guide the formulation of my argument and help LEAD ME to the creation of my thesis. ***Remember to follow the evidence and allow it to help form your thesis***.

* Don’t START with a thesis that you don’t have any real substantiation for, and then try to do research which confirms it. This is like trying to jam an ill-fitting puzzle piece into a part of the puzzle where it doesn’t fit. Even if you manage it, the final result will be jarring, incongruous and somewhat confusing to your reader.

Thanks to the careful formulation of the research questions above (not too narrow, not too broad, more focused, more complex), I was able to formulate a clear thesis that will help me to:

* *Frame some interesting biographical details about George Washington*
* *Address clearly one of the reasons why Washington had such a huge impact on the development or course of American history.*

**Sample Introduction, Thesis, and Central Argument:**

There is no question that George Washington was a much-loved president who is still revered today. **Among the many reasons for this reverence was Washington’s decision to step down after only two terms – in spite of the initial uproar against his intention to do so**. Who could possibly loom larger in the American consciousness than George Washington? Who else could be trusted? Indeed, while many of Washington’s supporters, both government officials and members of the American public, were initially dismayed by Washington’s decision to step down after only two terms, **it was in fact this decision that sealed Washington’s historical fate as the Father of the Nation. He would eventually be highly praised for this action, which conformed to the highest ideals of revolutionary-era political philosophy – that power resides with the people and no leader, no matter how competent or revered, should ever be allowed to establish a dynastic or potentially tyrannical hold over the nation. This precedent that Washington set was one that was followed by the vast majority of subsequent presidents, eventually becoming enshrined in our Constitution.**