

Guidelines for Forming Historical Questions

Many students make the mistake of thinking that history is nothing more than memorizing names, dates, facts and events. Though knowing this material is helpful, the best historians are those that ask good historical questions, that uncover the central issues and motives that shaped events, ideas, and peoples' actions. An analytic approach looks at causes and effects rather than just narrative. *How* and *Why* become the focus rather than *Who*, *What*, *Where*, and *When*.

- Bad Questions: *Who were the Maya? When did the Maya collapse?*
- Better Question: *Why did the Maya civilization collapse?*

Good historical questions should do the following:

- Address causes or effects
- Be open-ended (not having a yes or no answer)
- Be argumentative (can be legitimately answered in multiple ways)
- Be specific

Here are a few examples of solid open-ended questions that have multiple possible answers:

- *What impacts did the Tokugawa Shogunate's policy of isolation have upon Japan during the 1600s and 1700s?*
- *How was Napoleon Bonaparte able to gain power in France?*
- *What impacts did westward expansion have upon the southern United States during the first half of the 1800s?*

Always remember that your entire paper is an elaborate answer to your question, so it is very important that you form a question you can live with!