No. 204
Asking Questions

All research begins with a question. A thoughtful question will help guide a research agenda. A poorly crafted question generally results in poor research. For this reason, learning how to ask questions is a valuable skill. This is more difficult than one might think. Unfortunately, there is not simple method for teaching students to ask good questions. It simply comes with practice and a desire to be curious.

Many of my seminar courses require students to practice asking questions on a weekly basis. By submitting them for public view students can also learn from each other. To help you with this task, you should be aware of the two general types of questions – empirical and theoretical.[*] Strive to ask theoretical questions since they form the basis for interesting discussions and potential theses.

Empirical Questions: These questions get at facts. They typically are "who" "what" "where" and sometimes "how" questions. Such questions help you provide the necessary context of the situation you are studying, but rarely do they push you towards theoretical explanations of human behavior (the goal of social science). For this, you will need to ask a theoretical question.

Theoretical Questions: Research seeking to explain human behavior starts with "why" and "how" questions. The latter tend to focus on process – e.g., how did a situation end up at point B after starting at point A. Such questions direct you to fill in the causal steps between two historical moments. "Why" questions also push you to examine process but also try to uncover motivations and unexpected consequences.

The Comparative Why: When writing a thesis one of the best ways to get started is to ask a "comparative why" question. Why did this happen here but not there? This immediately guides you to the task of finding similarities and differences between the two (or more) cases and then think about what differences might be important in explaining divergent outcomes. Statistical analysis is based on this type of question writ large.

---

[*] For other helpful hints with this task, see the sheet on reading an academic work.

Where to Find Questions. A good place to start to look for questions would be under your bed. If you don't find any questions there, you are at least likely to find missing socks or dust bunnies. Other places to look include footnotes and conclusions. Many authors use footnotes and conclusions to toss out ideas for unsolved puzzles. Sometimes you can find ideas for questions in statistical tables or figures. Scatterplots are a good place to look as often the research is attempting to explain why the bulk of the data point line up in a certain fashion. There are probably going to be some outliers in that graph and thinking about why those outliers lie outside the main relationship is another way to come up with some good ideas for questions. Scholars often use the news to generate ideas. Since journalists only focus on a small fragment of an event, it is incumbent upon you to ask questions that fill out the rest of the environment. This could help generate ideas. For example, newspapers focused almost exclusively on the problems in Iraq following the Second Gulf War (in 2003), but ignored what was happening in Afghanistan. In large part this was because things were much more settled in Afghanistan and car bombs in Baghdad make more interesting copy. So why were things proceeding more smoothly in Afghanistan as compared to Iraq? The story that is not reported is often more important than the one that is, and forms the basis for good questions.   Also, use a mirror. Start to question your own behavior – why do you do things? Do other people do things like you do? If they do it differently, ask why? Curiosity about your own behavior often generates interesting insights into how other act.

What Is Your Justification? Finally, it is not just enough to ask a question. It is also important to explain the motivation behind your question. Perhaps something you read does not correspond with your own experience. Or the reading may conflict with something else you read. Revealing this motivation is useful in understanding the question itself.