

Handout 18: The Research Question

Session: Formulating a Research Question

The research question is the beating heart of any research project. For it to address a contested historical topic, it should be an open-ended question that solicits different kinds of responses allowing for multiple perspectives. Moreover, an ideal way to capture the multiple perspectives of a diverse group of narrators in an oral history project is through teamwork. Working together as a group, individual researchers can share their personal and/or professional networks to broaden access to a wider selection of narrators.

So let's go back to historical thinking skills to get us started on formulating a research question:

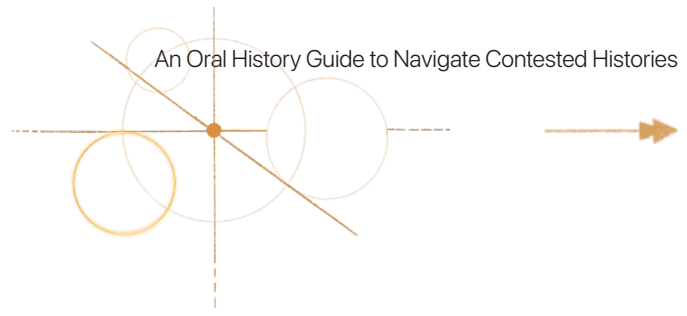
What skills do historians use to approach the past?

- Chronological reasoning - causation (cause/effect)
- Chronological reasoning - continuity vs. change
- Comparison - differences
- Comparison - similarities

These historical thinking skills are a solid basis on which to build a research question. The examples below are of open-ended research questions that incorporate historical thinking skills.

- **Chronological reasoning:** What was the most important turning point of the war?
- **Change:** economic/financial: What impact did the war have on the economy? On business? On individual standards of living? On people living in the North, South, Bekaa, etc.? On XX village?
- **Comparison:** What kinds of impacts did the war have on different geographies of the country compared to others? Why were certain areas more strategic than others? How was the war different in the urban vs. rural areas? In the cities vs. the villages? In the mountains vs. the coast?
- **Comparison:** How did the war physically impact the city? How did the Green Line change everyday life routines? Why was the Green Line located where it was? (Green Line, Holiday Inn, Karantina, Tel al Zaatar, etc.)?
- **Comparison:** (regional): How was the war in Beirut different than in Saida? Than Tripoli? Than Zahleh? Than Nabatieh? Than Zgharta? When did the war begin in XX vs. XX?
- **Causation (extreme violence):** What caused the XX massacre (Black Saturday, Karantina, Damour, Tel El Zaatar, Sabra and Shatila, etc.)
- **Change:** Role of Women: How did the war change the role of women in the family? How did women gain opportunities during the war that otherwise may not have been open to them?





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- **Change:** Education: How did the war impact the education system? What was it like going to school during the war? How were schools affected? What about universities? How did the war impact teachers? Students? Examinations? Young children?
- **Continuity vs. Change/Chronological reasoning:** When did the war end? Did it “end”?

Besides the fact that a research question should be broad enough to allow for multiperspectivity, two other points to ensure its strength are:

1. **Passion/interest:** The question matters to you. It addresses a topic that captures your imagination, or that has been passed down in family stories, or in conversation with friends, or otherwise. As the driver of this research, you should be curious about what you want to find out.
2. **Access:** You know people or know of people that can address your question through their own lifetime experience. In other words, you have potential narrators in mind.

