CSC: CoR: Chapter 3: From Topics to Questions

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. As you begin a research project, you will want to distinguish a topic from a subject. A subject is a broad are of knowledge (e.g. climate change), while a topic is a specific interest within the area (e.g., the effect of climate change on migratory birds).
2. If you can work on any topic, we offer only a cliché: start with what most interests you. Nothing contributes to the quality of your work more than your commitment to it.
3. Start by listing topics relevant to your particular class and that interest you, then narrow them to one or two promising ones. If the topic is general, such as religious masks, you'll have to some random reading to narrow it. But read with a plan.
4. Investigate the resources that your library is particularly rich in. If, for example, it (or a library nearby) holds a collection of rare papers on an interesting topic, you have found not only a topic but a way into it. Many unexpected finds await discovery in your library's archives.
5. The most useful way to think about a topic is as a starting place for your research. From this starting place, you can head off in a particular direction and thus narrow an overly broad topic into a productively focused one. At this point, your biggest risk is settling on a topic so broad that it could be a subheading in a library catalog.
6. If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting. And without an answer to support, he cannot *select* from all the data he could find on a topic just those relevant to his answer.
7. Start with the standard journalistic questions: *who, what, when, and where,* but focus on *how* and *why*. To engage your best critical thinking, systematically ask questions about your topics history, composition, and categories. Then ask any other question you can think of or find in your sources. Record all the questions, but do not stop to answer them even when one or two grab your attention.
8. If you are an experienced researcher, look for questions that other researchers ask but don't answer. Many journal articles end with a paragraph or two about open questions, ideas for more research, and so on. You might not be able to do all the research they suggest, but you might be able to carve out a piece of it.
9. Even so, once you have a question that hold tour interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: *so what?* Beyond your own interest in its answers, why would other think it's a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer the *So what?* question early on, but its one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.
10. Step 1: Name your topic: If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmering of a good question or two, start by naming your project.

Step 2: Add a indirect question: Add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about the topic.

Step 3: Answer *So What?* by Motivating your Question: This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that explains why you asked your first question.