

1. You'll find that better reason when you can ask a question whose answer solves a problem that you can convince readers to care about.
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. You can also find ideas in blogs, which discuss almost every contentious issue, usually ones too big for a research paper. But look for posts that take a position on narrow aspects of the larger issues: if you disagree with a view, investigate it.
4. With a promising topic such as the political origins of legends about the Battle of the Alamo, they mound up endless facts connected with the battle: what led up to it, histories of the Texas Revolution, the poor plan of the mission, even biographies of generals Santa Anna and Sam Houston.
5. • If a source makes a claim you think is persuasive, ask questions that might extend its reach. Elias shows that masked balls became popular in eighteenth-century London in response to anxieties about social mobility. Did the same anxieties cause similar developments in Venice?
6. Their answers are dead ends. How many black cats slept in the Alamo the night before the battle? It is hard to see how an answer would help us think about any larger issue worth understanding better, so it's a question that's probably not worth asking.
7. Your answer might be Nothing. I just want to know. Good enough to start, but not to finish, because eventually your readers will ask as well, and they will want an answer beyond Just curious.
8. But now, if you can, take one step more. It's one that advanced researchers know they must take, because they know their work will be judged not by its significance to them but by its significance to others in their field. They must have an answer to So what?
9. Some advanced researchers begin with questions that others in their field already care about: Why did the giant sloth and woolly mammoth disappear from North America?
10. Why does this matter?—but you face a problem when you finish it without having thought through those three steps at all. And if you are doing advanced research, you must take that step, because answering that last question is your ticket into the conversation of your community of researchers.