



# Asking Analytical Questions

When you write an essay for a course you are taking, you are being asked not only to create a product (the essay) but, more importantly, to go through a process of thinking more deeply about a question or problem related to the course. By writing about a source or collection of sources, you will have the chance to wrestle with some of the ideas that you are learning about in the course. Through the careful work of considering evidence and assumptions and thinking through the logic of arguments, you will begin to figure out what you think about complicated or controversial topics. Your goal when you write an essay should not be only to show readers what you know, but to learn more about something that you're genuinely curious about.

For some assignments, you'll be given a specific question or problem to address that will guide your thought process. For other assignments, you'll be asked to identify your own topic and/or question. In those cases, a useful starting point will be to come up with a **strong analytical question** that you will try to answer in your essay. Your answer to that question will be your essay's [thesis](#).

You may have many questions as you consider a source or set of sources, but not all of your questions will form the basis of a strong essay. For example, your initial questions about a source may be answered by reading the source more closely. On the other hand, sometimes you will identify a genuine ambiguity or problem in your sources that raises a question that others considering the same sources would also have. In that case, your answer to the question will be interesting not only for you, but also for your readers.

## Properties of a strong analytical question

A strong analytical question

- **speaks to a genuine dilemma presented by your sources.** In other words, the question focuses on a real confusion, problem, ambiguity, or gray area, about which readers will conceivably have different reactions, opinions, or ideas.
- **yields an answer that is not obvious.** If you ask, "What did this author say about this topic?" there's nothing to explore because any reader of that text would answer that question in the same way. But if you ask, "how can we reconcile



point A and point B in this text,” readers will want to see how you solve that inconsistency in your essay.

- **suggests an answer complex enough** to require a whole essay's worth of discussion. If the question is too vague, it won't suggest a line of argument. The question should elicit reflection and argument rather than summary or description.
- **can be explored using the sources you have available for the assignment**, rather than by generalizations or by research beyond the scope of your assignment.

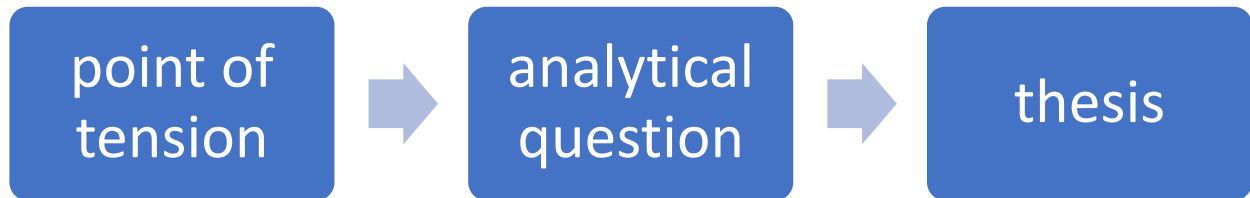
## How to come up with an analytical question

One useful starting point when you're trying to identify an analytical question is to look for points of tension in your sources, either within one source or among sources. It can be helpful to think of those points of tension as the moments where you need to stop and think before you can move forward. Here are some examples of where you may find points of tension:

- You may read a published view that doesn't seem convincing to you, and you may want to ask a question about what's missing or about how the evidence might be reconsidered.
- You may notice an inconsistency, gap, or ambiguity in the evidence, and you may want to explore how that changes your understanding of something.
- You may identify an unexpected wrinkle that you think deserves more attention, and you may want to ask a question about it.
- You may notice an unexpected conclusion that you think doesn't quite add up, and you may want to ask how the authors of a source reached that conclusion.
- You may identify a controversy that you think needs to be addressed, and you may want to ask a question about how it might be resolved.
- You may notice a problem that you think has been ignored, and you may want to try to solve it or consider why it has been ignored.
- You may encounter a piece of evidence that you think warrants a closer look, and you may raise questions about it.



Once you've identified a point of tension and raised a question about it, you will try to answer that question in your essay. Your main idea or claim in answer to that question will be your thesis.



## Tips

- "How" and "why" questions generally require more analysis than "who/what/when/where" questions.
- Good analytical questions can highlight patterns/connections, or contradictions/dilemmas/problems.
- Good analytical questions establish the scope of an argument, allowing you to focus on a manageable part of a broad topic or a collection of sources.
- Good analytical questions can also address implications or consequences of your analysis.