

Crafting Research Questions 11.233 Short Papers

As stated in the course description, these assignments ask you to present diary / journal-type reflections on what you are reading, preferably with relation to your thinking about your First Year Paper or dissertation research question. They do not need to be organized in any particular way, or formal. They should reflect a few notes you jot down for yourself after doing each reading with respect to your thoughts, or thoughts that struck you with respect to possible research questions after we discussed a particular reading in class, which you did not mention in class. (This often happens, as occurred with some of you after I or the others mentioned something in the class discussion with respect to a particular reading.) You are encouraged to write in the first person (e.g., “what struck me about this reading....,” “this particular point/theme [state it] in the reading raised an interesting question for me about my topic, namely....,” “this other point/theme [state it] in the reading made me wonder if I should move to a somewhat different formulation of my topic question, namely....,” or “this particular point/theme in the reading really made me want to work on another topic [state it and why], but I don’t know at this point how to narrow it down to a researchable question....”, etc., etc.

Keep in mind that the purpose of these assignments—as with the class discussion—is partly to move you toward a first-year paper and ultimately dissertation research question by helping you develop habits of reading that cause interesting research questions to pop into your mind as you read, or after when you are thinking about that reading. Even if you ultimately end up researching something else for your first-year paper or dissertation, these exercises will help you to come to your own question later, which will represent something you are “passionate” about—as some of you mentioned in class with respect to the Snyder reading—and at the same time is manageable for a modest research exercise like the first-year paper and allows you to do something that others would be interested in reading or even publishing.

Remember that these assignments are about raising questions that are researchable, not about questions that you already have an idea in broad terms what the answer will be. Pose questions that occur to you as an interesting puzzle. At the same time, avoid asking questions that are overly broad and abstract (e.g., “how do we reduce poverty in the world?” etc.), and think of the examples from our class discussion yesterday about how to turn such questions into more manageable and specific forms. Also, as in the Hirschman and Chang readings and as illustrated in the class discussion, be careful about the “buried assumptions” that may be in your research question—like assumed prerequisites (e.g., “roads and other infrastructure are prerequisites to private-sector development). “Outing” such assumptions – which are generally widely held and therefore not even seen by you as assumptions – makes for interesting research questions. Be sure to write concretely, be specific, use examples. Avoid writing vaguely and abstractly. Use the active voice as much as possible; avoid using the passive voice and to-be verbs (is, are, etc.), since this ‘deadens’ your writing and makes it unclear as to who the actors are.

If the reading elicits no particular thoughts about possible topics for your own research, then think of some possible “next-step” questions—of the kind we discussed in class yesterday—provoked in your mind by a particular reading, and not posed there. These kinds of questions would take a more concrete, narrowed-down form—again, as illustrated in the class yesterday—that would move you toward a manageable question for a first-year paper or dissertation, even if you yourself might not end up not choosing that particular question. Feel free also to combine a theme/point that comes up in more than one reading, including contradictions or contrasts between particular points among two or more readings, and the thoughts this raises in your mind about research topics you are interested in. By the end of your paper, you should have referred to all the readings that are assigned until the day the paper is due (including that day’s readings too).

All these first assignments should be no more than six double-spaced pages, with no less than 1-inch margins and font-size no smaller than New-Times-Roman 12. Papers are due on the first day of class in the week assigned. Late papers are not accepted, except for emergency reasons, and with prior permission of the instructor. Papers received after the due time will be automatically marked down.