

3.c.

How to Ask Good Questions

1. Good questions require thought and research. It is easy to pose a question like “should the atomic bomb have been dropped on Japan?” Such a question is simply an opinion question: it requires no research or special understanding into the problem. One way to begin framing better questions is to steadily add facts into the stew. These complicate your argument, basing it on solid historical premises (which of course you would need to prove in an essay). Think in terms of “givens.” For example:

- C *Given that* the Japanese military establishment had vowed to fight to the bitter end, should the United States have dropped the bomb on Japan?
- C *Given that* the United States’ government was becoming increasingly concerned with post-war struggles with the Soviet Union, should the United States have dropped the bomb on Japan?
- C *Given that* many in the United States expressed what may be called racist views of the Japanese, and in fact interned Japanese Americans in concentration camps during the war, should the United States have dropped the bomb on Japan?
- C *Given that* the United States had already embarked on an extensive and deadly campaign of carpet-bombing Japanese cities (like Tokyo), should the United States have dropped the bomb on Japan?

2. Explore premises and make them explicit. The questions above are not quite explicit enough. For example, so what if many in the United States were racist towards the Japanese? What does that have to do with the legitimacy of dropping the atomic bombing? Of course, most of us can guess what this author intends: that racism might have pre-disposed the U.S. to drop the bomb on the Japanese without sufficient military or political provocation. But it is very important to not let such assumptions go unstated. It is the task of the author to make *every part of the argument explicit*. In the case of the questions above, each of the unstated premises may be expressed as a more detailed part of the larger question:

- C What impact did racism have on the decision to drop the bomb?
- C What impact did the brewing Cold War with the Soviet Union have on the decision to drop the bomb?
- C What impact did military strategy have on the decision to drop the bomb?

3. Keep going. Even these questions can be further broken down:

- C Did racism lead the U.S. to drop the bomb on Japan when it would not have done so on Germany? How exactly did American views of the Japanese and Germans differ? How could such popular cultural views have influenced a foreign and military policy thought to be rational?
- C What in our dealings with Stalin might have prompted the U.S. to drop the bomb on Japan? Why might U.S. strategists have thought dropping the bomb would have been useful at all?
- C What, rationally, could U.S. strategists have considered necessary to win the war against Japan? Why did they press for unconditional surrender when they knew Japan was beaten? What is actually the case that dropping the bomb saved U.S. lives? If so, what about the moral costs of bombing civilian non-combatants?

As you can begin to see, once you start thinking about it, one simple question can lead to a huge chain of questions. Remember, *it is always better to keep asking questions you think you cannot answer than to stop asking questions because you think you cannot answer them.* But this can only happen when you know enough about your subject to know how to push your questioning, and this depends on reading and understanding the assigned material. How can you know that racial stereotypes of the Japanese may have played a key role in the decision to drop the bomb if you have no knowledge of the period?

Finally, you may also note that there are some very large questions underlying this entire debate. What *were* legitimate reasons to drop the bomb and what were not? When is it legitimate to use a weapon of mass destruction, and especially against a civilian population? What moral and ideological factors keep it from happening more frequently? What political and strategic factors permit it under certain circumstances? Such questions may or may not be the immediate subject of your investigations, but you should always be on the lookout for them, and always keep them in mind. Such questions tend to be the ones that make all others worth asking.