

# Writing an Effective Central Question and Thesis Statement



History of American Popular  
Culture Research Paper

# Some of your topics (a partial list)

- Gender stereotypes in toys
- *Blade Runner*
- Teen culture on tv (2000s)
- Red Sox & Boston marathon bombing
- Horror movies
- LA Riots as reflected in NWA's music
- Fusion of politics/comedy in '60s tv vs current
- Serial killers in pop culture
- *Grey's Anatomy* (social issues)
- *Person of Interest* (tech on tv)
- *The Sopranos* infl. on tv
- *Soul Train*
- ABA/NBA merger
- Music (festivals, songwriting, jazz, Beatles)
- Impact of technol. on dating
- Amer. sports culture on tv
- *How the Grinch Stole Xmas*
- Emma Chamberlain & fashion trends
- People: Jackie Robinson, Walt Disney, Kanye, Britney Spears, Kid Cudi, LosPollosTV, Elton John, Tom Brady, Beyonce
- Paying college athletes
- Hall of Fame & steroids in baseball
- Evolution of tattoos



# The Central Question...

- Establishes a connection between your topic and U.S. history, culture, and/or society.
- Provides your paper with scholarly significance -- why the reader should care about your paper.
- Can't be written without some knowledge of U.S. history/culture in the period related to your topic
- The question should lend itself to an analytical & argumentative response (the thesis) -- NOT a factual answer.

# Other things to keep in mind...



- Your topic can be broad (i.e., technology in sports), but your Central Question & Thesis need to be narrow and focused
- You are writing 4-8 pages, not a book. It's better to be narrowly focused than to barely scratch the surface of your topic.
- Coming up with a central question that can be answered succinctly is one of the challenges of this assignment.

# Steps for Writing a Central Question:



- ❑ Choose a topic
- ❑ Research -- start with general background on the topic (overview) & time period (social, political, economic, cultural landscape)
- ❑ Use what you know from your reading to formulate a question
- ❑ Considering what you know now, how might you answer that question? (tentative thesis)
  - ❑ As you keep researching, you will probably revise that thesis and possibly fine tune your question as well.

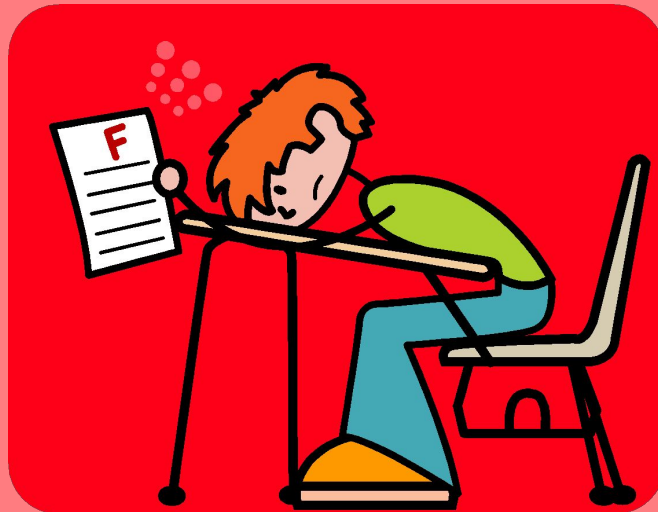
# BAD CENTRAL QUESTIONS

- What is the history of the Olympics?



# WHY IS THIS BAD?

- Too broad
- Answer to the question is factual
- Lacks an explicit connection to American history/culture/society



# MORE BADDIES

- Is the mafia as bad as it was portrayed in *The Godfather*?





# WHY IS THIS BAD?

- Yes / no question
- Too general with regard to time period
- Lack of scholarly significance (*The Godfather* is fictional piece of work)



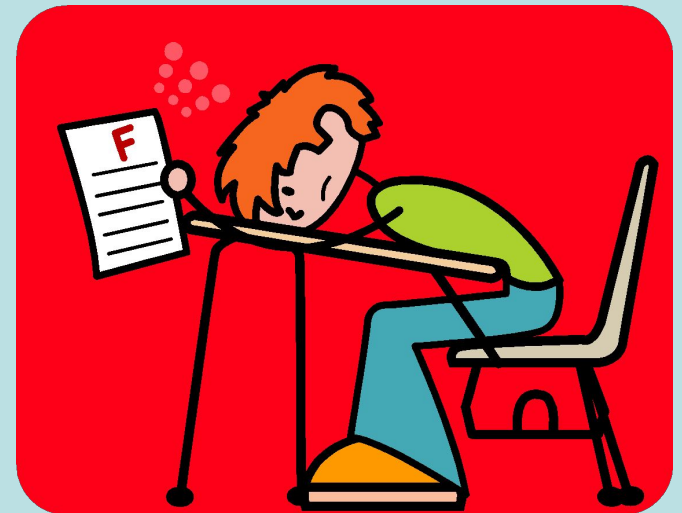
# YET ANOTHER BAD QUESTION

- What was it like to attend Woodstock?

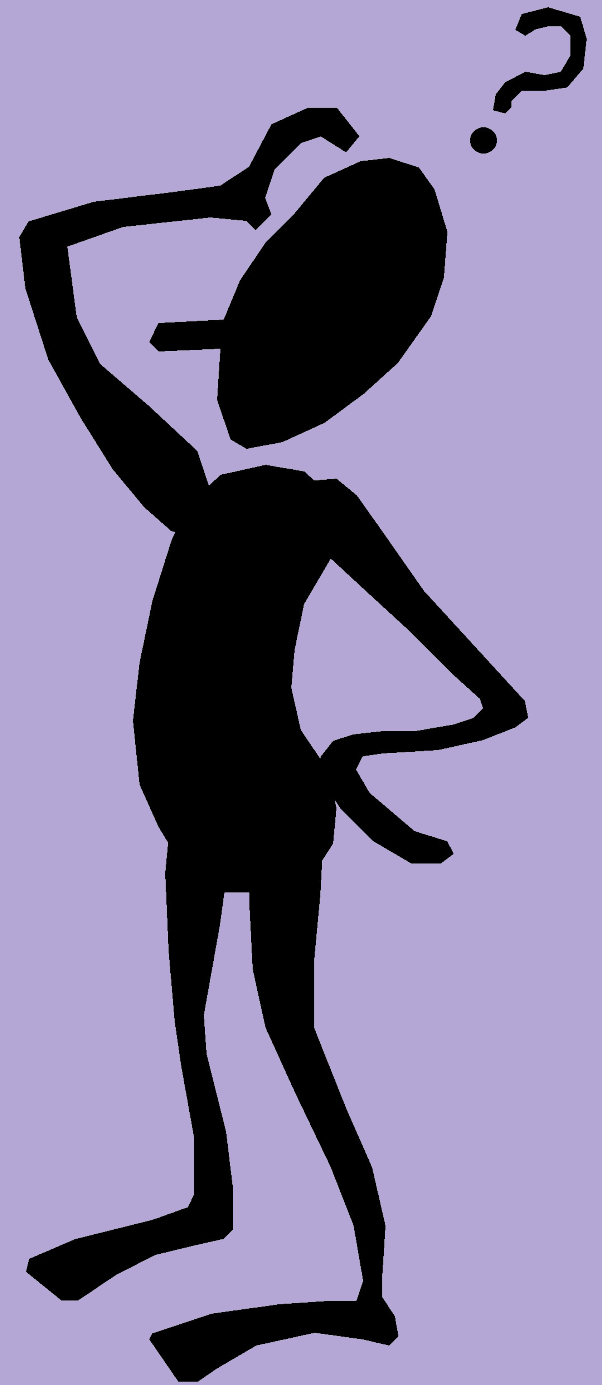


# WHY IS THIS BAD?

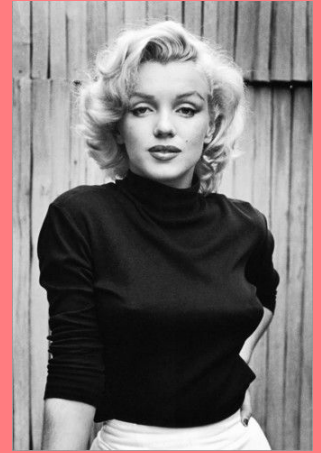
- Too broad
- Again, no explicit connection to American society or culture
- Not argumentative



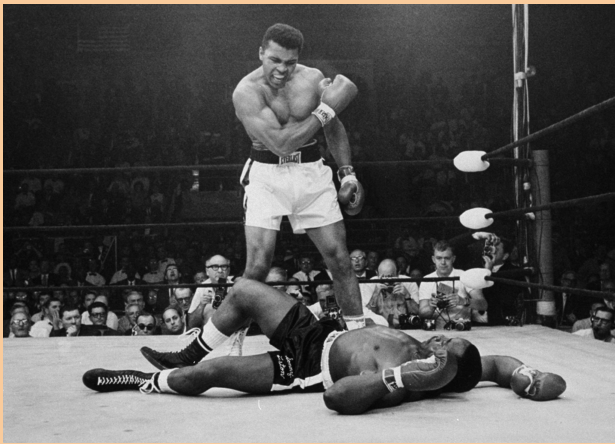
What would  
a GOOD  
research  
question look  
like?



# Topic Example: Marilyn Monroe



- Potential Central Question:
  - How can *Marilyn Monroe's* films be used to understand American culture in the 1950s?
- Analytical Thesis Statement:
  - Marilyn Monroe's popularity--demonstrated by the hit film 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'--reflected America's move toward a more sexually open culture in the 1950s.



# Topic Example: Muhammad Ali

- Potential Central Question:
  - How is Muhammad Ali a symbol of '60s era racial and political conflicts?
- Analytical Thesis Statement:
  - Muhammad Ali's membership in the Nation of Islam and decision to resist the draft was a symbol of the radicalization of his generation in a time of social change and conflict.



# Topic Example: Music of the Counterculture

- Potential Central Question:
  - What is the relationship between the protest music of the '60s and the turbulent social climate of the '60s?
- Analytical Thesis Statement:
  - Not only did the protest music of the 1960s speak to the turbulent social climate but it also helped to spark action and social change.

# Topic Example: Children's Toys



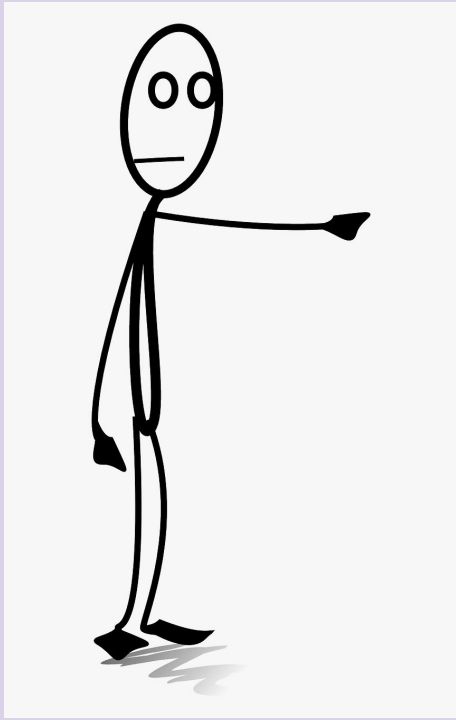
- Potential Central Question:
  - What do children's toys from the 1950s to the present say about American society's beliefs on gender?
- Analytical Thesis Statement:
  - Children's toys reflect societal norms and stereotypes on gender; a comparison of toys from the 1950s and present reflect the shift in gender expectations in these decades.





# Topic Example: *Cops* (tv show)

- Potential Central Question:
  - How can the TV show *Cops* be used to understand America's changing values & beliefs about drugs, police brutality, and racism from the 1990's to the present day?
- Analytical Thesis Statement:
  - The TV show *Cops* reflects the nation's changing thoughts on drug use, police brutality and racism from 1989 to the present day.

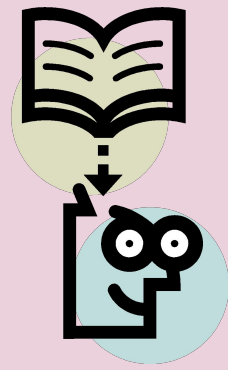


Now it's your turn.

Take your topic and the notes you've gathered so far.

How can you connect your topic to something bigger? Something that matters?

# The purpose of RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- Once you've established your central question and tentative thesis, you are going to want to write several research or inquiry questions.
- The goal is to identify the smaller areas you would need to research in order to really understand all of the nuances of your topic.
- In order to answer the big question, what smaller questions do you need to be able to answer first?

# For example...

*If I were to write a paper on Jackie Robinson & his role in the integration of baseball and in the broader civil rights movement, I might start with the following questions or areas of research:*

- When did Robinson join the MLB? What was his background in baseball prior to that?
- Why did the MLB decide to integrate? Who supported/opposed this action?
- What was happening with other professional sports leagues at this time? Was the MLB the only integrated league?
- How was Robinson treated on the field by his teammates and opposing teams? How did fans (both black and white) respond to him and did that vary by city/region of the country? the press when he joined the league?
- How did Robinson perform in the MLB? What was his record on the field? (How did that compare to white athletes? How did people react to his performance?)
- What was going on in the U.S. at the time he joined the league? (politically, socially, economically.)
- What was happening in the Civil Rights Movement at that time and in the years before?
- How were African-Americans regarded in society at the time?
- What political/social mobilization (if any) existed within the black community?
- What (if anything) did Robinson do off the field with respect to civil rights?
- How did Robinson change the game of baseball?

NOW YOU DO IT!

