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How to Write a Paper for This Class

To write history is to make an argument by telling a story about dead people. You'll be dead one day, too, so please play fair, and remember: never condescend. It's probably bad enough being dead without some smart aleck using your life and times to make a specious claim. Every argument worth making begins with a question. In *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, Alfred Young's question was, "Why, in the 1830s, did people start calling what happened on December 16, 1773, a 'tea party'?" In *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, Bernard Bailyn asked, "What does the Revolution look like from the losers' point of view?" Good questions come in all shapes and sizes. Very roughly, you can sort yours into two piles. One kind is more empirical (what happened?): "Why, on the eve of the American Revolution, did the painter John Singleton Copley decide to leave Boston?" The other is historiographical (what's at stake in the debate among historians about what happened?): "Have historians overstated the role of urban artisans in securing the repeal of the Stamp Act?" The best, most rigorous and most interesting scholarship answers both sorts of question; it's also much more fun to write, and to read.

Your question hasn't been tattooed on your forehead. You can change it. Very likely, no one will even notice. If things are going well, you might decide, once you get into the research, that your question is bad, or even terrible. It might be the wrong question. It might be the right question, but you can't answer it. That's fine; that's excellent, actually: that's what's supposed to happen, so long as you think of a new question, or a chain of questions. A question isn't a fish, a very wise historian once said; it's a fishing license. It says what kind of fish you're looking for, and where you're going to put in your boat. Never go fishing without a license. Once you've got that license, though, sail into the wide water, and cast your line. These instructions concern writing, not research. How To Catch A Fish is a whole other handout.

Reel in the fish. You'll know you're ready to begin analyzing your evidence when you've found sufficient material to answer a question that fits, a question that emerges both from the primary sources and from the scholarship, a question that you can answer in a fifteen- to twenty-page paper, a question that matters to you, and that matters to historians' interpretation of the American Revolution. Another very wise historian once