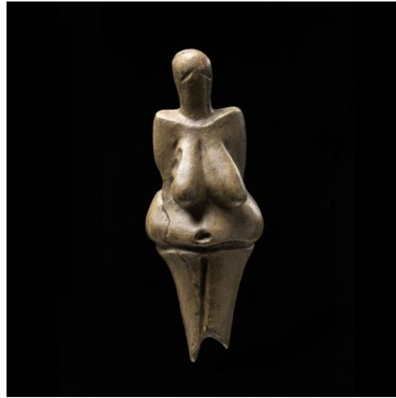
research / curiosity



What do you imagine when I say the word "research"?

Here's what I'd like you to imagine:

As you walk to school, as you squeeze onto the night bus, as you nod off on the train, as you read an essay for school, as you lie in your bed in the morning, staring at the ceiling, as you scroll through your Instagram comments, as you scroll through the news, as you sit on the toilet, an idea takes shape in your head. The idea seems stupid, or it seems very urgent, or it seems funny. You pay attention to the idea, you hold onto it for a moment. You don't let it slip away. You repeat it to yourself, you say it out loud to a friend, you write it down.

Then you do a Google search, and you find a few new words or names to attach to your idea. The idea starts to form into a question, maybe many questions. **What** is this thing I'm thinking about? **Where** did it come from? **Why** is it the way it is? **When** did it take its current form? **Who** decided it would be this way? **How** can I find out more?

Then a friend in the pub, or a classmate, or a mentor, says, "That's an interesting question! That reminds me of…" or "I've also been thinking about that…" or "What if you looked at it from this perspective…" or "Have you ever read…" or "Have you ever seen…"

That leads you to further discoveries: an article, a book, an argument, a video, a painting, a piece of music—they fire your curiosity further and give it a form, a purpose. A path along which to search for a while…

Then you start writing more, jotting down reactions, questions. Nothing finished or even "academic" yet. Just notes. But as you write more, your questions get more specific, more focused. They might be questions no one has asked before, at least not in the way you've asked them. You respond to these questions; you write down the responses. You build an argument. You show it to other people, people who know it's just a draft, just a first attempt. They give you suggestions. You learn how to interest them in your questions; you learn how to

frame the problem in a way they can understand. They challenge you and encourage you. Your questions give birth to new, strange curiosities in yourself, in others…

…or maybe they lead you in circles, back to where you started, or maybe to a dead end, or maybe to despair. But even then, you have a story to share, a research result—the story of your failed research. Which might be very interesting to some people!

This is how I'd like you to imagine research: your natural human *curiosity*, given a direction and a form. Your curiosity formed into *words*, and evolving into new forms as it is written, spoken, and *shared with others*.

If research is curiosity given form, then of course it can take many forms—all of which could be useful, but some of which are probably more useful than others. So let's start by talking about one of the most basic and useful forms which curiosity (and thus research) can take—a *question*.

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In many of the writing classes I've taught in the past, I've asked students to develop and write down a "research question." I told them that the research question was simply the question which they will try to answer with their essay or writing project. But I realized I was confusing some students with that term. When I said "research," some of them thought I wanted them to do primary scientific research; many of them were imagining, for instance, quantitative research which might involve collecting large amounts of numerical data and doing statistical analyses; or qualitative research as it might be done in the social sciences, which might involve interviewing dozens of people and showing how that data supports a particular theory. Even students who were not in scientific fields often misunderstood what I meant by "research"; some thought that by asking for research I was requiring them to use academic citations, and to quote only published academic articles in their papers—even if they were writing a more personal essay. Obviously, there are very interesting questions which could be answered with such kinds of research. If some students want to do this kind of research, I don't discourage them! But I also want to encourage them to understand research in a broader sense.

So I did a bit of my own research, to find an alternative to the phrase "research question" that might better explain what I had in mind. I found two phrases which I liked: "guiding question" and "driving question."

Both of these terms are commonly used in the pedagogical field of "project-based learning"—in which teachers guide students as they develop and carry out a project. One reason I like these terms better is because their "-ing" endings (which suggest an ongoing action) are a good reminder that any questions that emerge during a writing project are temporary, works in progress; the question which is guiding or driving you now can and will change as you gain more information and experience and your inquiry becomes more sophisticated. But I also like these terms because they don't immediately evoke the academic world of books and charts

and hard data. They suggest instead a more innate, natural desire for knowledge, experience and mentorship—things which can certainly be found outside school and outside the forms of academic journals.

So when I ask you to develop a "research question," a "guiding question" or a "driving question," here's another way of saying I mean: I want you to start by writing a specific question to which you think there are probably multiple valid answers to. It should be a question which excites and motivates you to search for how other people have answered it (or for how they've answered very similar questions). And it should be a question which you imagine will keep sending you back to work at your writing desk, responding to those others and articulating your own unique answer.

Then, simultaneously as you write a particular essay, I want you to keep rewriting your guiding question, making it more specific, more unique, more challenging for you and your readers. The idea is that your guiding question and your essay develop together, symbiotically—until your writing feels like a successful (although not necessarily final!) answer to the question. In some cases, it's a great idea to directly state your question IN the piece you're writing. In other cases, it may be better to leave it out. But it's still worthwhile to have it in your head, even if it does not appear in the final draft.

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Let's move on to some more specific and practical tips for developing a question which will drive and guide your writing.

Here are the two main parameters, or dangers—the Scylla and Charybdis—between which a research/guiding/driving question should fall, or float:

1. Your question should not be answerable with a simple YES/NO or with already acknowledged FACTS. It should be debatable. In other words, it should be a question about which knowledgeable, intelligent people might find different answers. If there's no debate, if there's no real *question*, then why write about it?

   Last semester, one of my students submitted this possible research question: "Is winter in Czech Republic different from how it used to be?" The first thing to notice about this that it's a yes/no question. And the answer is obviously YES! Of course winter is different now—in many, many ways. A better question would be, HOW is it different? But even then, it's a huge question. So, I asked the student to rephrase it. And by rephrasing it, she started to see that there were much more interesting questions "hiding" in this original question. Imagine you were this student; how would you revise the question?

2. Your question should not be too BIG, or broad, or vague. It should be a question which you can reasonably hope to give an interesting possible answer to within several pages of writing.

   Last semester a student offered this as his initial question: "What is the history of Kroměříž?" To which I think I actually laughed out loud in class! I feel bad about that. I probably shouldn't have laughed, and I hope I didn't embarrass the student too much. But I laughed because I was imagining him actually trying to write the answer to this question. Can *you* imagine it? Even though Kroměříž is not a very big place, you could write until the end of time and never finish telling the *entire* history of Kroměříž.

   So I asked the other students in the class to help him narrow down the question. The best way to start doing this is by asking follow-up questions—what other questions would we need to ask to be able to even START answering this initial question? It's easy, and very helpful, to begin with the 6 basic question words in English, and think of a follow-up question for each. I've done the first two as examples—how would you finish the rest?

   Who…is going to read this history, and what level of knowledge do they already have about Kroměříž?
   What…kinds of details will count as "history"? What's "important" (and…who decides what's important?)
   Why…
   Where…
   When…
   How…

Already you can see that these first follow-up questions lead to more questions, which will lead to still more questions…and you'll have to decide where to stop asking questions and "make a stand." But that's the job of a writer! And it's something you'll get better at as you go along.

Besides asking follow-up questions, it might be very helpful to apply the concept of "Thing 1 / Thing 2" to your research question. Most initial questions have an obvious "Thing 1," a basic subject or topic. But they often lack a "Thing 2," another idea which will introduce some tension, some friction into the mix. As I said before, a "Thing 2" can be almost anything! But one "Thing 2" which will work in a lot of cases is to choose a specific person's (or group's) *perspective* from which to view the topic. For example, some of the biggest breakthroughs in the arts and sciences came when a researcher applied a theoretical perspective from one field to the problems or questions in another field (of course, this has also been a source of misleading pseudo-science—so you need to be direct and meticulous in your analysis if you try this technique). Sometimes, researchers have found great insight by looking at something from—*very literally*—a different point of view. One of my favorite examples of this is explained in a 1996 article by Catherine Hodge McCoid and Leroy D. McDermott: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/682890

The article talks about possible interpretations of so-called "Venus" statuettes from the Paleolithic period (one of which is the famous "Věstonická venuše" from South Moravia, pictured above). These figurines portray women with exaggerated features—huge breasts, butts, and bellies. Many anthropologists had assumed that these were sexualized images made by men. But McDermott proposed another interpretation. He realized that if an average woman were looking down onto her own body, she would see her own features exaggerated in a very similar way to what the Venuses portrayed. He theorized, then, that the Venuses were in fact made by women (perhaps pregnant women), possibly as tools in instructing other women about reproduction and childbirth. As McCoid and McDermott write, "When examined, this proposal becomes so compelling that the only remaining question is, Why did it take so long to consider the logical possibility that a female point of view was involved?" Good question.

But the most obvious choice for a "Thing 2," especially if you are writing a journalistic or personal essay (but perhaps even an academic essay) is to apply your own personal perspective to an issue. For example, going back to the student who was writing about Kroměříž—he eventually told us that his motivation for writing about the history was that his mother was a tour guide there, and she had asked him if he could help her give her English-speaking visitors some "inside" information that would interest them and make them have more fun on the tour. So, the student's eventual guiding question was something like this:

"How can I give an informative and entertaining tour of the history of Kroměříž for English-speaking visitors, giving a quick overview of the most important events and places, but also giving personal details which will give the visitors a view into everyday life for the residents and how it has changed?"

That question may seem rather long and maybe a bit "unscientific" to you—and maybe it is—but it helped guide the student toward particular choices about what to include and what style to write in. It also helped him write something that wasn't just a standard guide which you could already find in a tourist center, but something more much unique and interesting. And in that way it was very useful—much more useful than his original question.

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Here's another (hopefully) helpful way to theorize how research works in a piece of writing:

If *research* can be seen as the "Thing 1" in your writing process, then your *response* to that research can be seen as "Thing 2." Most interesting pieces of writing involve research (in other words, reading, listening, absorbing other people's work). But research alone isn't enough—you, the writer, should respond to others' work in some way (for example: agree with it and give more support for it; disagree with it and give support for your disagreement; agree with parts of it and disagree with others; neither agree nor disagree with it but offer a new

perspective from which to view it…and the list of possible responses goes on and on into infinity). Truly great writing balances research and response in a compelling way.

And I hope I've already made this clear, but let me state it more directly:

The genre or style of essay you're writing does not *precisely* determine which sources you can use for research. Just because you are writing a "personal" essay doesn't mean you aren't allowed to refer to strictly "academic" literature. In fact, doing this could be very exciting. And vice versa—just because you are writing a strictly "academic" article doesn't mean you aren't allowed to refer to non-academic sources, or even to personal experience.

The main difference between the forms which research takes in personal essays and in academic essays is not WHICH sources are used, but rather in HOW sources are used and HOW they must be referred to in the essay itself.

That said, it should be obvious that your *particular* research question might require particular kinds of sources to answer it. If your question is, "Are the ideas of Sigmund Freud still respected in contemporary Slovak psychological literature?" there's no way you will be able to answer it using poetry and soul-searching. You'll have to talk to your professors, and dive into some psychological journals.

The better you articulate and develop your driving question, the more clearly it will guide you toward the kinds of sources which might answer it. The best answer to your questions about what kind of research to use is: READ lots of other examples of the genre and field you are writing in, and use them as models.

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As a final thought, let me send you back to one of my favorite research sources, the Online Etymology Dictionary. Here's the entry for "research (v.)":

> 1590s, from Middle French *recercher*, from Old French *recercher* "seek out, search closely," from *re-*, intensive prefix (see re-), + *cercher* "to seek for," from Latin *circare* "go about, wander, traverse," in Late Latin "to wander hither and thither," from *circus* "circle" (see circus).

As you can see, the word "research" contains older words whose meanings suggest wandering back and forth, or even in circles! Not very encouraging if you want to see research as a linear path from a question to an answer.

On the other hand, if you accept and embrace this rhythm of wandering back and forth, of doing and then undoing, of questioning, answering, then re-questioning, I think you have a more realistic sense of what research is actually like, and what writing is like.