

What Happened and Why?

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MOST HISTORIANS know how important questions are to their enterprise. The poet W.H. Auden understood that good scholarship can only come from good questions, saying “history is, strictly speaking, the study of questions.” Others have concurred. The great British historian Hugh

What Historians Explain

Most high school and college history students have long been told that the most important part of a historical argument is the thesis. Many know

legitimacy of their problem as they must to establish the answer to it. Not

will do so with his questions already in their minds; instead, Diamond himself has posed these questions, and before answering them must support his right to ask them. Is it in fact the case that no hunter-gatherers adopted writing, or that different peoples developed writing at vastly different points in history? If these premises behind the central question cannot be established, perhaps the question itself is misguided, and thus its solution must be, too.

In practice, we can think of well-crafted historical problems such as this one as almost always entailing questions for which there are several premises or "givens." If for example, a historian wishes to explain how

article and when he/she is likely to do it. Further, it can tell the reader what to look for, and how to evaluate the argument, and offers a yardstick by which to measure the author's success. How do we go about this in practice? Let me lay out a few questions students might consider when

Historical Inquiry (Appendix 1: Essay Evaluation Questions)

Does he/she spend more time on some points than on others? Are any

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dents would be well advised to think in these terms. What about the chosen topic defies simple explanation? Where might other historians have missed something, or have gotten it wrong? What opportunities exist to intervene in ongoing scholarly discussions about the topic? Ideally, course readings will model historical debates, and perhaps even provide established debates students might step into.

This suggests that writing strong papers requires a knowledge of secondary historical arguments related to the topic being researched. Reading critically as I have suggested can help students quickly grasp the arguments in historical literature on a given topic, and can illustrate how they can interject their own voices into ongoing historical debates. Ultimately, the goal is to enable students to participate in the scholarly process. History, for students who learn these lessons, will come alive. From a passive process of imbibing received wisdom from unchallenged

The Return of Martin Guerre (1984). I suggest that educators choosing to implement the strategies I've discussed carefully choose the appropriate time for each type of reading assignment.

Some students will always love history, but almost all need to be taught how to write the kind of history that history instructors are interested in reading. I am confident that most will do better, however, if we can effectively share with them the thinking processes that so attracted us to the field. Most importantly, we should also share with them the lesson that historians themselves have learned, sometimes through painful experience—that some questions are indeed better to work with than others.

Appendix 1: Essay Evaluation Questions

These questions will guide students through the preparation of “road maps” to historical arguments. One of the best places to put the “road map” exercise to use is in near

The argument in general:

- 6. What unanswered questions does the problem raise?
- 7. What alternative explanations could be offered for the phenomenon described?
- 8. What criticisms does the author need to anticipate?
- 9. Given the thesis, what examples or scenarios could make it wrong?
- 10. How could the thesis be modified to overcome these shortcomings?

Topic sentences and paragraphs:

- 11. Point out topic sentences which do not relate to the thesis.
- 12. Paragraphs are miniature arguments; point out paragraphs where the miniature argument is unclear.
- 13. Point out paragraphs which fail to support the topic sentence.

Use of evidence:

- 14. In which paragraphs are there insufficient or inappropriate source evidence to support the argument of the paragraphs?

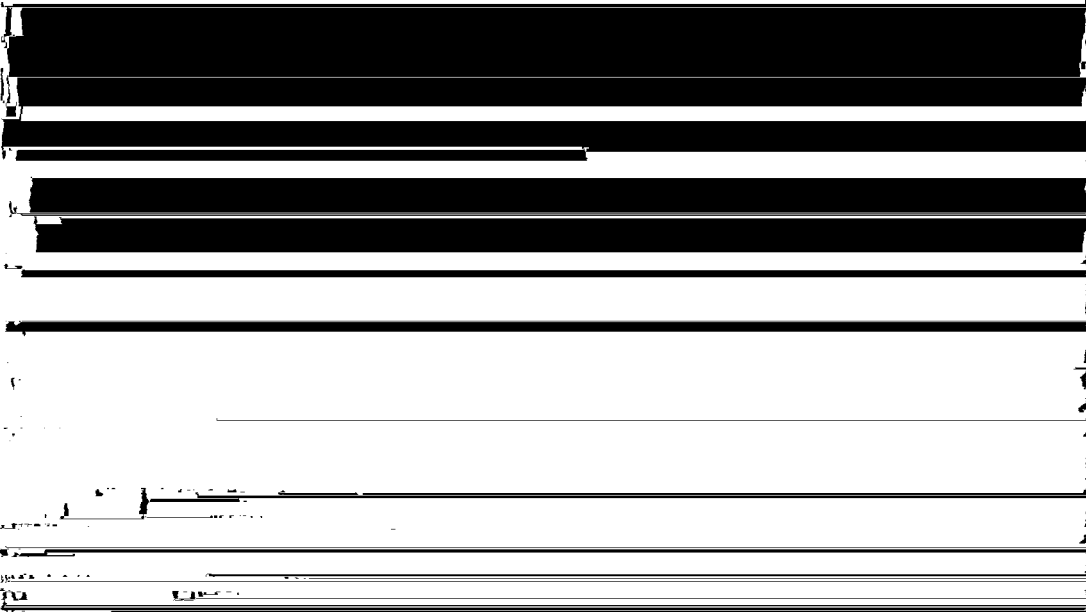
1. The problem:
Given apparent German advantages of long experience, excellent fighter designs, and a well-developed tactical fighter doctrine, how did Allied air forces become capable of bombing Germany with impunity by the end of World War II?
2. Premises inherent in the problem:
The German air force possessed several advantages which suggested its capacity to inhibit the effectiveness of Allied bombing campaigns, such as:
 - a. *Long experience with tactical air power (which it developed in the Spanish Civil War);*
 - b. *Fighter designs (such as the Messerschmitt Bf-109 and Focke-Wulf FW-190) that surpassed comparable Allied aircraft;*
 - c. *An elaborate system of homeland defense.*

By the end of the war, the Allies had somehow negated these advantages and were capable of bombing German targets with relative ease.

3. The thesis:
German air defense suffered from two limitations that doomed its capacity to protect the homeland

4. Components of the thesis:
 - a. *The limits of a fighter doctrine predicated on attack;*
 - b. *Severe inadequacies in producing new fighters.*

The introductory paragraph of this paper offers the reader a skeleton argument or "road



form of evaluation, they will go far toward embracing the principles of sound historical argumentation.

Notes

1. For critiques of an earlier draft of this essay, I am thankful to my Bowdoin College colleagues Mathew Klinge and Page Herrlinger, and to the anonymous readers for *The History Teacher*.

2. For more on these historical habits of mind, see Samuel S. Wineburg, *Histori-*

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