There's difference between "bad" and "good" questions. Good questions are:

Debatable
That also means they have been debated. You will need to present a debate, either among historians or among people at the time. You may take a position on the debate yourself.

Narrow
You will need to be able to
give a credible answer to
your question in a concise
format. Don't take on a
question that is too openended.

Significant
There must be something
important at stake in the
answer, not just to you—
because you're curious—
but in terms of large
historical issues. Think
"consequences."

Researchable
You will both primary and secondary sources.
Secondary sources should include books and scholarly journal articles. Do not limit your research entirely to websites.

More about bad and good questions:

Bad question	Good question
Just rewords a topic	Helps you choose evidence
Can be answered from simple factual digging; your knowledge gap doesn't make a paper	Gives you a position on which to take a judgment and make an argument
Too big	Forces you to analyze and think critically
Too vague	Suggests an outline
Morally one-sided	Sends you to a debate you can present and join
Counterfactual—can't be disproven	Suggests what primary evidence to interpret
No accessible primary sources	Suggests what secondary evidence you'll need
Suggests you write a "report." Instead: recall you're an historian you are NOT doing a simple chronology or an isolated re-creation.	Answers others' curiosity-including people who know the subjectnot just yours

Examples of topics, bad questions, and better questions

Topic: Causes of the American Civil War

Bad question: What caused the American Civil War? [too big]

Pretty good question: What were the most important causes of the Civil War? [allows judgment, argument]

Topic: The Magna Carta

Bad question: What was the Magna Carta? [answerable with simple facts]

Pretty good question: What forces led to the Magna Carta? [fairly easily answered, but possibly debatable]
Pretty good question: What was the impact of the Magna Carta? [immediate impact is pretty factual, but a

longer view allows some debate]

Better question: Who benefited most from the Magna Carta? [requires judgment, analysis to answer, which fosters an argument]

Better question: Was the Magna Carta a precursor to Parliament? [yes or no question, but the answer requires definitions of terms and judgment] – could be improved to: "How did Magna Carta influence the creation of Parliament?

Good questions: How did Magna Carta influence leading American revolutionaries who (revolted in the 1770s, or drafted the US Constitution)?

Topic: Colonialism in Africa

Bad question: What European countries had colonies in Africa? [simple factual question]

Bad question: What would have happened if Africa had never been colonized? [counterfactual—your answer

can't be disproven, so it's not factually debatable]

Half-decent question: Why did some European countries have more African colonies than others? [requires judgment about European countries, but hard to answer from primary sources in 6-8 pages]

Bad question: Why did the world allow Europe to rape Africa? [too moralistic, one-sided]

Better question: What was the impact of colonization on African people? [similar to above, but allows

weighing, even if a morally firm answer is ultimately reached]

Topic: Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment

Bad question: What was the relationship between Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment? [vague]

Better question: Was Benjamin Franklin typical of the American Enlightenment? [allows judgment]

Better question: What features of the Enlightenment does Benjamin Franklin illustrate? [allows judgment] Better question: In what ways does Benjamin Franklin not illustrate the Enlightenment? [allows judgment]

Notice that the questions are in present tense if they are asking about what we learn now from a particular inquiry and in past tense if the answers happened in the past.

Good questions fall into a few categories, which often overlap or co-exist:

- o causes (or a ranking of causes)
- o effects/impact (possibly also ranked)
- o contextualization
- o compare and contrast
- o change over time; continuity over time
- o interactions
- o illustration of larger trend

For instance, say you wanted to use Civil War nurses for your topic. Possible research questions would be

- a. What were some of the pre-existing gender roles and expectations that shaped the experience of nursing? That's the cause side of a cause and effect question; you could also call it a contextualization question, fitting a narrow phenomenon or event into its context.
- b. Did the experience of nursing in the Civil War cause lasting changes in those women's lives, in women's professional opportunities, in gender relations? That's the effect side of a cause and effect question.
- c. Did the experience of nursing in the Civil War vary for Northern vs. Southern women? That's a compare and contrast question.
- d. How did the experience of nursing change from the beginning of the war to the end? That's a change over time question.
- e. Under what circumstances did women nurses take on doctor-level duties? Were only women serving as nurses? Were only white women hired? Under what circumstances were non-white women hired? These are analytical questions about how institutions and events interacted.
- f. What does the development of nursing during the Civil War tell us about gender relationships even today? That's an illustration of larger trend question.