

story ask about the interests of the storytellers and their effects on their stories: *How have politicians used the story? How have the storytellers' motives changed? Whose purposes does each story serve?* These can be combined into a single more significant question:

How and why have users of the Alamo story given the event a mythic quality?

With only a topic to guide your research, you can find endless data and will never know when you have enough (much less what to do with it). To go beyond fact-grubbing, find a question that will narrow your search to just those data you need to answer it.

3.4 FROM A QUESTION TO ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Even if you are an experienced researcher, you might not be able to take the next step until you are well into your project, and if you are a beginner, you may find it deeply frustrating. Even so, once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one *about* it: *So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking?* You might not be able to answer that *So what?* question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

Think of it like this: What will be lost if you *don't* answer your question? How will *not* answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do? Start by asking *So what?* at first of yourself:

So what if I don't know or understand how butterflies know where to go in the winter, or how fifteenth-century musicians tuned their instruments, or why the Alamo story has become a myth? So what if I can't answer my question? What do we lose?

Your answer might be *Nothing. I just want to know.* Good enough to start, but not to finish, because eventually your readers will ask as well, and they will want an answer beyond *Just curious.* Answering *So what?* vexes all researchers, beginners and experienced alike, because when you have only a question, it's hard to predict

whether others will think its answer is significant. But you must work toward that answer throughout your project. You can do that in three steps.

3.4.1 Step 1: Name Your Topic

If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmerings of a good question or two, start by naming your project:

I am trying to learn about (working on, studying) _____.

Fill in the blank with your topic, using some of those nouns derived from verbs:

I am studying the *causes* of the *disappearance* of large North American mammals . . .

I am working on Lincoln's *beliefs* about *predestination* and their *influence* on his *reasoning* . . .

3.4.2 Step 2: Add an Indirect Question

Add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about your topic:

1. I am studying/working on _____
 2. **because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how _____.**
1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
 2. **because I want to find out whether they were hunted to extinction . . .**
1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and its influence on his reasoning
 2. **because I want to find out how his belief in destiny influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War . . .**

When you add that *because I want to find out how/why/whether* clause, you state why *you* are pursuing your topic: to answer a question important to you.

If you are a new researcher and get this far, congratulate yourself, because you have moved beyond the aimless collection of data. But now, if you can, take one step more. It's one that advanced researchers know they must take, because they know their work will be judged not by its significance to them but by its significance to others in their field. They must have an answer to *So what?*

3.4.3 Step 3: Answer *So What?* by Motivating Your Question

This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that explains why you asked your first question. Introduce this second implied question with *in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether*:

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
 2. because I want to find out whether the earliest peoples hunted them to extinction
 3. **in order to help my reader understand whether native peoples lived in harmony with nature or helped destroy it.**

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning
 2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,
 3. **in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs may have influenced his military decisions.**

It is the indirect question in step 3 that you hope will seize your readers' interest. If it touches on issues important to your field, even indirectly, then your readers should care about its answer.

Some advanced researchers begin with questions that others in their field already care about: *Why did the giant sloth and woolly mammoth disappear from North America?* Or: *Is risk taking genetically based?* But many researchers, including at times the three of us, find that they can't flesh out the last step in that three-part sentence until they finish a first draft. So you make no mistake *begin-*

ning your research without a good answer to that third question—*Why does this matter?*—but you face a problem when you *finish* it without having thought through those three steps at all. And if you are doing advanced research, you *must* take that step, because answering that last question is your ticket into the conversation of your community of researchers.

Regularly test your progress by asking a roommate, relative, or friend to force you to flesh out those three steps. Even if you can't take them all confidently, you'll know where you are and where you still have to go. To summarize: Your aim is to explain

1. what you are writing about—*I am working on the topic of . . .*
2. what you don't know about it—*because I want to find out . . .*
3. why you want your reader to know and care about it—*in order to help my reader understand better . . .*

In the following chapters, we return to those three steps and their implied questions, because they are crucial not just for finding questions, but for framing the research problem that you want your readers to value.