Research Paper Advice

One of the most important steps during the process of writing a historical research paper is picking a topic that ***you*** are interested in and one that will stimulate your curiosity. When considering this, think about the things that you find intriguing. Historians examine the past through multiple lenses, which includes ***political institutions and actions, battles, cultural shifts, gender, "great men" vs. the common people, economics, local institutions vs. federal institutions, labor movements, myths vs. reality***, just to name a few. As you consider a topic to research, keep these lenses in mind. Think about these and determine which ones you are most interested in and then you can apply them to your broader topic.

Example #1: If you are interested in politics and you pick the Civil War, you could examine specific pieces of legislation that Lincoln and Congress passed during this period. You would then need to ***analyze*** the legislation and ***explain*** why it was important or groundbreaking within the broader category of the Civil War. You may ***conclude*** that it was detrimental to the war effort and therefore a mistake. After you have ***examined*** the primary sources regarding your topic, you will ***analyze*** said sources and produce an argument ***(thesis statement)*** based off your research.

Example #2: Maybe you are interested in battles and you decide to ***examine*** the Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome. The Punic Wars are too broad of a topic so you would need to narrow it down. You could, however, ***examine*** one specific battle and ***argue*** why a specific general's strategy was revolutionary, which is why he won, or that it was a mistake. As mentioned above, you would ***examine*** the specific battle through primary sources that you will ***analyze*** and then ***argue*** how it influenced the broader subject of the Punic Wars.

To reiterate, think about the lenses and determine what you are interested in. Then determine which event, person, movement, or era you want to investigate. Within this broader category, you will focus on the specific lens and only research that component. During your research, you may come across another aspect of the broader category and want to shift your perspective. This is completely fine to do because that means you have discovered something new and exciting. ***This is why it is vital that you start early!!***

NOTE: When picking a topic, understand that the further back in time you go the more difficult it could be to locate primary sources. I am not telling you this to discourage you only to provide you with some insight.