Developing Effective Open-Ended Questions and Arguable, Research-Based Claims for Academic Essays

<u>**Asking Open-Ended, Arguable Questions**</u>
In academic papers, the thesis is typically an answer to a question about a significant issue that has more than one possible answer and requires research to provide evidence. It is usually not a summing up of accumulated knowledge, or a report on information. It aims to resolve an issue by engaging with different viewpoints, taking a stand, and making an argument supported by evidence.

To determine whether a question is appropriate for an assignment, consider whether the question can be answered with evidence and whether it is worthwhile to do so. Is there already a clear answer? Is it common knowledge? Are there differences of interpretation, perspective, or opinion? Is it answerable by research? Or is it an eternal, unanswerable question?

Following is a useful way to analyze potential research questions, determine their appropriateness, and consider how to change them into significant topics.

Level 1: Questions that <u>can</u> be answered with knowledge you have right now
<u>Examples</u>:
- What is the first book in the Hebrew Bible?
- What two Gnostic Gospels were excluded from the New Testament?
- In what religion would the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, be considered a common practice among its followers?
- The term *Hindu* refers to core religious beliefs in what country?

Level 2: Questions that <u>can</u> be definitively answered with scholarly research
<u>Examples</u>:
- How many years did the Qin Dynasty last?
- Which Roman emperor first implemented the *Aliment* program of social welfare?
- According to Robert Miller, what is the predominant "theological outlook" in the Gospel of Mary?
- Who were the first four *Rashidun Khalifas* of Islam following Muhammad's death?
- The *Bhagavad-Gita* is centered on a conflict between which two Aryan clans in Northwest India in the 12th century BCE?

Level 3: Questions that <u>cannot</u> be definitively answered but <u>can</u> be researched and on which a position can be formed and supported with scholarly research
<u>Examples</u>:
- Why did Buddhism become such an important religion in China?

- Is the Caste System intrinsic to Hinduism?
- How did Christians clash with Roman values, if at all, and why did Romans believe the Christians posed a political threat?
- What factors led to the spread of Islam under the Umayyad Caliphate?
- How did theological debates in Islam following the Abassid reveal underlying social, ethnic, and class tensions?

Level 4: Questions that <u>cannot</u> be addressed with scholarly research, either because of a lack of evidence (e.g., questions that have to do with people's "real" convictions) or because they ask something that cannot be answered by citing evidence (e.g., philosophical or theological questions)

<u>Examples</u>:

- Did the ancient Egyptians really believe in the pharaoh's divinity?
- How did the majority of Roman slaves perceive Christian martyrdom following the death of Jesus?
- Did Ali anticipate his assassination and what would he have thought about the historical conflict between the Sunni and shi'a?
- Did Arjuna really believe Krishna when he said, "Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these kings; and never in the future shall we cease to exist" ("Second Teaching, verse 12)

MMW writing assignments ask you to address a Level 3 question and write a persuasive argument backed by scholarly research on a significant issue relevant to the course material. Any question, though, can help you find a level 3 question. If your question is a level 1 or 2, ask why it matters to you and why it would matter to others, what issues it relates to, in what context does it matter to know the answer. Look for the argumentative angle. If your question is a level 4, look at your motivation, the context, and the variety of ways of approaching the question: why do you want to know? What can you research relevant to that desire? Use the level 4 question to inspire you.

Theoretically, some Level 4 questions, such as "Why is Christianity a good religion?" can be answered with scholarly research if you define what "Christianity," "good" and "religion" mean, but such an argument requires a theoretical framework, level of sophisticated reasoning, and depth of research that goes beyond the scope of the MMW assignments. Answering such a question well, if it's even possible, would be much harder and take much more time and thought than we are asking you to do. Often, questions of opinion that are easy to answer in a casual, personal way are very hard to answer in an academic setting. The MMW assignments are designed to help you build your academic writing skills progressively.

Developing Arguable Claims

Claims are answers to questions. Questions set you up for certain types of claims. If you ask for facts, then the claims will state facts.

MMW assignments ask you to take a position on a significant <u>issue</u>, and support your position by <u>interpreting</u> facts. Most claims, even of fact, are arguable to some extent, but not all claims can be supported by scholarly research and not all are open-ended enough or significant enough to be appropriate for MMW assignments.

To determine what is appropriate and make good decisions about how to focus your argument and what evidence you need to provide, consider these five common types of claims:

<u>Type</u>	<u>Example</u>
Fact	"Mesopotamia lies mostly within modern Iraq."
Value	"With good reason, [the King James Version of the Bible] has been termed 'the noblest monument of English prose.'"
Policy	"[The Bible's] message . . . must be presented in language that is direct and plain and meaningful to people today."
Definition	"We use the term *city-state* to refer to independent ancient centers and the agricultural hinterlands they controlled."
Causation	"There is evidence for a decline in the standing of women in the Semitic second millennium B.C.E. This development may be linked to the rise of an urbanized middle class and an increase in private wealth."

(Note: the above quotes were taken from various texts that were used in MMW2. We should have cited them when we had the chance. Let this be a reminder to always cite your sources when you're taking notes.)

The above types of claims answer the following questions:

Fact:	Did it happen? Is it true?
Value:	Is it good or bad? Which criteria do we use to decide?
Policy:	What should be done about it? What should be the future course of action?
Definition:	What is it? How shall we interpret it?
Causation:	What caused it? Or, what are its effects?

Answers to any of these questions could be arguable. That is, even a claim of fact is not necessarily "true"; rather, it is a mode of presentation that *claims* truth—which must then be supported with evidence.

To construct a compelling argument, find what's arguable in a claim and make the case for the claim with reasoning and evidence to back up each point you make.

Generating Claims from Evidence
Use the evidence and the questions implicit in these five common types of claims to generate claims and organize arguments.

Sample Topic: Classical Athens

Sample Questions:

TYPE	GENERAL FORMAT	EXAMPLE
Fact	Did it happen? Is it true?	Did Thucydides record Pericles' actual words in his account of the Funeral Oration? Would his readers have expected him to do so?
Value	Is it good or bad? Which criteria do we use to decide?	Was Athenian democracy more "fair" or egalitarian than other systems of government operating during the fifth century B.C.E.?
Policy	What should be done about it? What should be the future course of action?	Should we judge classical Athenians' treatment of women according to our own morality and standards of behavior?
Definition	What is it? How shall we interpret it?	What is the political significance of *Antigone*?
Causation	What caused it? Or, what are its effects?	What led fifth-century Athenians to develop their system of participatory democracy?

The grid:

Question	Evidence	Claim	Counter-arg.	Rebuttal	Significance
What is the political significance of *Antigone*?	• Sophocles (the author) favored democracy and was a friend of Pericles • Within the play, the majority opinion is the correct one • etc.	*Antigone* was a piece of pro-democracy political propaganda.	Such a claim is too simplistic; Antigone's piety and her respect for natural law (*physis*) are also depicted as "good" behavior, yet neither of these qualities is necessarily pro-democratic.	Such concerns need to be taken into account, but the primary emphasis of the play is on moderation and on following the will of the majority. (E.g., look at who gets punished and who does not.)	• *Antigone* demonstrates fifth-century Athenian concerns. • The mode of presentation (public performance for all citizens) shows how these concerns were aired.

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