Developing a Research Question

The following steps from Booth et al. (2008) will help you formulate a specific, critical question to guide your research:

- Identify your broad topic.

  For example, *Anti-Semitism in German rap music.*

- Narrow your broad topic to a specific topic by adding **verbs** (or nouns that imply action) and focusing on a **specific time and place**.

  *The **nature** and/or **development and prevalence** of Anti-Semitism in **mainstream** German rap music **in the 2000s – 2010s.***

- Consider different questions about your topic. You might use the following categories and kinds of questions to get you started:

  History
  (larger context or focus on internal historical details)

  What were the themes of German rap music at its origins (1980s) and is there a continuity to the Anti-Semitism present today?
  What is [specific rap group's] history with Anti-Semitic lyrics?

  Context and Systems
  (context of a larger system or how the topic itself fits together)

  How does Anti-Semitism in German rap music reflect/ relate to Anti-Semitism in the broader German culture and society?
  How do specific actors in the German rap music industry (rappers, labels, audiences) respond to instances of Anti-Semitism?

  Categorization
  (try grouping into kinds or comparing and contrasting)

  What kinds of Anti-Semitic lyrics exist in German rap music?
  Are instances of Anti-Semitic lyrics in German rap music different (in form and/or reception) from other kinds racist or xenophobic lyrics?

  Turn a positive question or claim into a negative one.

  Why has Anti-Semitism not appeared in other genres of music, like pop music?

  Ask *what if?* **questions** that speculate on other possibilities for how past events might have happened or how future events might happen.

Ask questions posed or suggested by secondary sources and agree, disagree, or explore an area that has not yet been researched.

- At this point, look at your possible questions and discard
    - settled facts that could be looked up.
    - questions that are impossible to answer.
    - questions that lack a "so what."

- Here is one formula for putting it all together:
    1. **Name your topic.**   *I would like to study/ write about...*
    2. **Pose an indirect**   *because I want to find out*
       question.   *who/what/when/where/**whether**/**why**/**how**...*
    3. **Ask *so what?***   *in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether...*

- Here's an example using this formula:

Name your topic	*I am studying the nature and reception of Anti-Semitic German rap lyrics in the music of mainstream musicians and music groups in the 2010s*
Indirect question	*because I want to find out how and to what extent these instances of Anti-Semitism are related to/ reflective of growing Anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany during the same period,*
So what?	*in order to help my reader understand the role of popular culture in the spread/ normalization of Nationalistic, racist, and/or xenophobic attitudes in Germany.*

Works Cited:

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams: The Craft of Research. 3rd Ed. Chicago 2008.

"Developing a Research Question." A handout from the Barnard College Library.

https://guides.library.barnard.edu/AMST/citing-and-writing.

Concept for handout: Goethe University Schreibzentrum, Frankfurt a.M., 2020.