Research Papers: A Beginner's Manual

By Pearl G. Aldrich

Let us follow the procedure to narrow a wide subject, with history as the example. Q: What point do you want to make? A: I want to discuss the Revolutionary War.

Your subject is now limited to a specific era and a specific event, but it is still too large to cover in a one-course paper. Therefore, ask yourself the following questions to further narrow the subject. The key words are italicized.

2. What aspects of the Revolutionary War do you wish to discuss? Well, it had causes. It had results. It had problems. It had major issues. It had personalities of interest in both military and diplomatic posts. It also had many, many other aspects that you could list. We'll use 'problems' to continue our example.

3. What kinds of problems? A few answers that come to mind quickly include the following: The problems of spies during the Revolutionary War. The problems of financing during the Revolutionary War. The problems of Recruitment during the Revolutionary War…

For many assignments, any one of the above could be sufficiently limited. However, the shorter the paper, the more highly specialized the subject must be; therefore, you might have to scale it down a little more. You can further reduce the size of the subject by placing it in time or space or by identifying people, according to the following additional questions.

4. When were the problems troublesome?

When was the financing handled or the money raised?

When were the spies most active?

5. Where were the problems most troublesome?

Where was the financing handled or talked about?

Where was the money for the troops raised?

Where were the spies concentrated or most active?

6. How were the problems most troublesome?

How was the financing handled?

How was the money for the troops raised?

How were the spies most active?

7. Who handled or identified or caused the most troublesome problems?

Who was involved with the financing, in one way or another?

Who raised or provided the money for the troops?

Who were the spies?

8. The final step for limiting your subject is to return to the original question. What point do you want to make about the Revolutionary War? The answer will give you a specific and limited subject for your paper.

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