

## ASKING QUESTIONS

In history, as in many disciplines, the key to finding good answers depends upon asking appropriate questions. A primary focus of this course will be on discussions of the assigned readings. These discussions will be based on questions submitted by the students prior to the class sessions. Students will thus play a major role in shaping the content of this course and subjects that we choose to discuss.

To facilitate these discussions all students are required to submit questions based on the readings identifying the topics that they wish to talk about each week. All questions must be posted to the class Blackboard no later than 6 p.m. on the day before the reading assignment is due. Please consult the Blackboard prior to coming to class to see both your own questions and those of your classmates.

For this format to work best, it is essential that you think about and format your questions carefully and that they be designed to stimulate discussion. Before writing your questions, try to identify the central theme or argument of the book, chapter, article, or excerpt that you have read. This will give you guidance as to appropriate topics for discussion. Adhere to the following guidelines in composing your questions:

1. You should submit a three questions each week.
2. Be sure that your name appears before the first question and that your initials appear before each question.
3. Questions *must* be based specifically on the readings. When readings are assigned from more than one text, article, or document you should ask at least one question from each source.
4. Ask questions about things that pique your interest and that you will be interested in discussing in class. Questions should be directed not to the instructor, but to the class as a whole.
5. Ask specific, rather than broad, general questions. Do not ask, for example, *What were the causes of the Great Depression?* Ask instead, *What role did the stock market crash play in bringing about the Great Depression?*
6. Be sure to make specific reference to the readings in each question and identify the page number that the quotation appeared on. Most good questions require at least two sentences. A good format for a question would be:

*Kevin Starr argues, "Faced with a ruinous depression, Californians of the 1930s managed, amidst some social misbehavior, to accomplish one of the most creative decades in the history of any American state." (xviii) Doesn't this seem to be an overly optimistic view of the 1930s? Doesn't Starr overlook the environmental consequences of these "creations?"*

7. Don't hesitate to write much longer questions. You might, for example, use the question to express an opinion or to critique the author's opinion.

*Robert McElvaine seems to be overly enamored of the accomplishments of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. The truth is that the New Deal unnecessarily expanded the size of government without putting much of a dent in the Great Depression. Why have historians almost universally accepted the liberal interpretation of the New Deal?*

8. Feel free to raise factual questions (*Who was Upton Sinclair? What was the Wagner Act?*) in class if the answer is not clear in the readings. However, do not submit questions that require specific answers as discussion questions. You might phrase a factual question in the following way:

*Many writers describe Franklin Roosevelt as the savior of capitalism. However, it was under Roosevelt that we saw a dramatic expansion of government that was more likely to stifle than encourage business activity. Increased taxation and the spread of labor unions drove up the costs of doing business. Nor did the New Deal ever bring an end to the Depression. How then, can we view FDR as the savior of capitalism?*

9. Try to identify possible conflicts or contradictions in the various readings and use them to formulate questions for discussion.

*Kevin Starr seems to be quite cynical in his description of Upton Sinclair, dismissing him as a "health nut, food faddist, and teetotaler" (123). Robert McElvaine treats him more sympathetically, concluding that "his methods were solid, sensible, and practicable." Do the authors really differ in their assessment of Sinclair? If so, who gives the more accurate appraisal?*

10. Keep in mind that these questions are designed to stimulate discussions. Try to raise broad philosophical issues wherever possible. Pay particular attention to the methodology used in each of the readings: sources, historiography, writing, and organization. Formulate questions related to these issues wherever possible.

For examples of how graduate students have handled this assignment see the following web site: <http://bss.sfsu.edu/tygiel/hist790/default.htm>