

THINKING YOUR WAY TO AN ESSAY TOPIC: FINDING A GOOD QUESTION

“What people think of as the moment of discovery is really the discovery of the question.” –Jonas Salk

Readers will be interested in your paper if it teaches them something they care about that they don’t already know. Sparking this interest is fundamentally tied not just to the claim your paper presents, but to the question it asks. A good question convinces readers that there is a gap in their understanding and that something significant is at stake in that gap. But a good question is more than a rhetorical device for provoking readers’ interest; good questions advance knowledge by guiding research in a new way.

An essay’s guiding question is most often found at the beginning of the introduction. The question is typically presented in two parts. In the first part you establish some **stable context** or status quo by making an assertion that is or seems true. You then challenge that seemingly stable notion by presenting a **destabilizing condition** that complicates or calls it into question. Though the examples below focus on a work of literature, the technique of generating a promising essay question by isolating a tension or paradox works equally well for analyses of nonfiction, visual art, and even data sets.

Stable context: As a religious poem, John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet XIV” asks spiritual questions about redemption from sin.

Destabilizing condition: But extended references to war and sexuality pose these spiritual questions in a surprisingly physical way. How do we reconcile the poem’s deep spirituality with its intense physicality?

Stable context: In “Holy Sonnet XIV,” Donne’s speaker seeks to avoid sin by being taken captive, asking God to “imprison” and “enthrall” him.

Destabilizing condition: Yet the speaker simultaneously suggests that this state of captivity will make him “free.” How can we make sense of the speaker’s idea that abandoning his will to God increases his freedom?

Stable context: The initial octet of Donne’s “Holy Sonnet XIV” develops an elaborate military metaphor. Using language like “batter,” “o’erthrow,” “usurped town,” and “viceroy,” the speaker likens God to an army battling the sin within him.

Destabilizing condition: But the poem’s final sestet abruptly shifts from the language of war to the language of a romantic relationship, using terms like “love,” “bethroth’d,” “divorce,” “chaste,” and “ravish.” How does this shift in metaphor reflect the speaker’s changing vision of his relationship with God?

Holy Sonnet XIV

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain,
But am bethroth’d unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

– John Donne

Stable context: Given his passionate focus on resisting sin, it is no surprise that the speaker of Donne’s “Holy Sonnet XIV” asks God to keep him chaste.

Destabilizing condition: Yet he yearns for that chastity in a shockingly sexual way: by asking God to “ravish” him. How is it possible to be both chaste and ravished? How do we make sense of the speaker’s notion that forced sexuality can make him pure?

Stable context: Donne’s “Holy Sonnet XIV” is a poem of worship in which the speaker tells God, “dearly I love you.”

Destabilizing condition: Yet this seemingly reverential speaker adopts a demanding tone, suggesting that he blames God for not doing enough to protect him from sin. How is it possible for the speaker to blame God for his corrupt condition and worship God at the same time?

Stable context: In “Holy Sonnet XIV,” Donne’s speaker presents himself as extremely passive, repeatedly asking to be acted upon by God.

Destabilizing condition: Yet the speaker makes these requests in an extremely demanding tone of voice, directing God to “batter,” “o’erthrow,” and “divorce” him. How do we reconcile the speaker’s passive stance with his demanding tone of voice?