

Finding a Research Topic for Clio

There are different ways to approach your research topic; two are outlined here. In one, you start with a theme or concept that you'd like to explore and then move to how it might be mapped to the landscape. In the other, you start with a place you find fascinating and then connect it to history. Feel free to use the approach that best suits you.

Starting with a theme

What kinds of historical themes do you find interesting or compelling? (For example: women's history; the history of the Cold War; technological history; the history of science; African American history; Native American history; urban history... the possibilities are endless!)

Where might you find physical representation of this kind of history in your local landscape? You can consider traditional "historic" places, but you might also think more broadly about how the past could be made to be visible in the world around you.

See if you can find concrete examples of these locations. Maybe there's a nearby monument. A school named after a famous individual. A street that's been renamed many times over the years. A major industry that has reshaped the landscape. List some ideas here, and then do some preliminary research to refine your choice of topic.

Starting with a place

What nearby places fascinate you or make you want to learn more? These could be traditional historic places or simply parts of your local landscape that have drawn your attention.

Do some preliminary research about some of these places. What can you learn about their past? Can you begin to situate them into historical context?

As you begin to narrow your choice of topic, here are some important things to bear in mind:

1. **Significance:** Do you sense the broader historical significance of this place/thing? Can you connect it to a wider context?
2. **Feasibility:** Have you come across resources that will support your investigation? Things will no doubt turn up as you dig into your subject, but it is important to have an idea of where to start your work.
3. **Scope:** Remember that you have 500-1,000 words to write about your topic. This means that your topic should be able to support serious research, but also that you can do it justice in 6-8 paragraphs. If you think your topic is too narrow, consider how you might make connections to flesh it out a bit more. For example, if you're writing about a cemetery, there may only be so much information available about the design and management of the cemetery itself, and you may want to include vignettes about some of the individuals buried there. If you think your topic may be too broad, the reverse approach can help: think about a specific facet of your topic that you'd like to address in detail and that has a particularly strong connection to place.
4. **Connection to place:** Are you able to identify a particular location that connects to your research topic? If you are writing about the history of a landmark that is still visible, this is relatively straightforward. Other cases might be more abstract and require you to think carefully about how to articulate your topic's connection to a given place.

After discussing with your instructor and colleagues, what is your final choice of topic?