Teaching the research paper begins with encouraging students to find sources on their own. The difficulty for the instructor rests in being able to direct students to the correct sources. In this discussion, we will address the following problems:

1. How can instructors help students formulate questions that suit the length of a 10-week research paper?
2. How can instructors best encourage students to formulate research questions based on problems that arise from primary sources?
3. How can instructors best help students construct manageable and useful reading lists?
4. How can instructors best guide students on using electronic resources?

These are not the only problems that exist in teaching research, but addressing these questions is an important step toward creating a path for students to produce an original work based on real problems that arise from primary sources.

The following is simply meant to foster discussion YOU ARE NOT EXPECTED TO PREPARE ANSWERS AHEAD OF TIME

Assignments/Specific Examples:

For these questions, list some research questions or thesis statements that are “doable” and some that are not. What sorts of readings would you assign? How would you guide the student to discover problems through reading primary sources? What types of sources would you discourage students from using? Name a few good electronic resources (ejournals/ebooks/encyclopedias/etc).

1) Assign a paper on a figure whose intellectual contributions were used or interpreted by different groups for different purposes. What kinds of questions would you deem “doable”? What kinds of questions are too open ended?

2) Assign a paper that addresses both the biographical background of a novelist as well as the content of his/her novel(s).

3) Assign a paper exploring how the development of the technology of communication affects the behavior of religious fundamentalist groups.

4) Assign a paper comparing concepts of natural law that have emerged in two different systems of thought that are separated by space and/or time.
1. Problems with teaching the research paper

1.1. Students often formulate research questions that are too large in scope. How can instructors help students formulate questions that suit the length of a 10-week research paper?

1.2. Students often formulate research questions based on secondary source material. How can instructors best encourage students to formulate research questions based on problems that arise from primary sources?

1.3. For many topics, the scholarly literature is vast. How can instructors best help students construct manageable and useful reading lists?

1.4. For many topics, electronic resources are both highly accessible and often unhelpful or outside the scope of the project.

2. Some types of problematic research questions:

2.1. Intellectual influence: Questions such as “What influence did person X have on the intellectual activity of person Y?” are too broad in scope for a 10-week paper.

2.1.1. A complete answer to the question would require that a student compare all of the available writings of person X with all of the available writings of person Y.

2.1.2. In a broad sense, questions regarding the History of Ideas are valid, yet they are best treated by singling out specific cases.

2.1.3. One solution to the problem of the questions of influence would be to guide students to ask questions like: “What are some major differences between person X and person Y on the concept of Z?” Formulating a research question in this way allows students to focus on select passages rather than the entire oeuvre of an author or scholar.

2.1.4. This simpler formulation of the question also allows students to identify specific problems in rather than broad-scope issues of influence.

2.2. Translation theory: Questions such as “How did the translation of a work from language A into language B transform the text?” are also too broad in scope.

2.2.1. A complete answer to the question requires reading the work in its entirety in both languages.

2.2.2. The problem is that undergraduates, even those with good skills in languages A and B, do not possess the tools necessary to complete this assignment in 10 weeks.

2.2.3. A possible solution would be to formulate this question in the following way: “What are some significant semantic differences between ‘word in language A’ and its translation ‘word in language B’?”

2.2.4. Such a question can be approached easily with electronic resources and search functions and will allow students to select passages appropriately and in a focused manner.

2.3. Hermeneutical theory: Questions such as “What is the over-arching theory of interpretation used by figure A to interpret the work of figure B?” are too broad in scope.

2.3.1. The problem is that interpretive styles are often explicitly stated by the interpreter or agreed upon by scholars. Therefore, such a question does not address real problems.

2.3.2. What is both more manageable and more focused on real problems are questions like “In what way does figure A interpret concept X in a way that breaks the conventional pattern of figure A’s interpretation of the writings of figure B?”

2.3.3. This type of question forces students to read critically and also leads to inquiry into salient problems.
2.4. At this point, I will ask participants to give other examples of questions that are too broad to answer in a short paper.

3. The problem of relying too closely on secondary sources
3.1. Comparing and contrasting the opinions of modern scholars
   3.1.1. Formulating questions based on disagreements among modern scholars can end up being an exercise in summarizing rather than an exercise in critical thinking.
   3.1.2. Evaluating such problems is not without its merits, but formulating a question such as “Why does text A lend itself to variant interpretations?” or “Why does historical even A lend itself to variant responses” encourages students to go back to primary sources and allows students to engage critically with the work of the modern scholars in whom those students have an interest.

3.2. Open up discussion to other problems.

4. The problem of the vastness of scholarly literature.
4.1. A list of helpful tips for formulating manageable reading lists:
   4.1.1. Working within the course syllabus reading list itself without too much outside reading can allow students to stay focused on working within the spirit of the class.
   4.1.2. Avoid materials that are tangentially related to the research topic. That is, not every article or book about the topic is necessarily helpful for answering questions.
   4.1.3. Collect a set number of readings that directly relate to specific sections of the paper outline.
   4.1.4. Encourage students to discover sources by exploring the “further reading” sections of textbooks, encyclopedias, or other reference works.
   4.1.5. Open up discussion on other helpful tips

5. The problem of electronic resources: The problem, put most simply, is that search results are easy to generate but do not help students in actively seeking out sources.
5.1. Some specific issues:
   5.1.1. Google results offer a mixed bag of scholarly research, opinion blogs, newspaper articles, etc.
   5.1.2. Keyword searches, even in online databases of scholarly materials or in the library catalogue provide a mix of (a) relevant material, (b) tangentially related material, and (c) unrelated material.
   5.1.3. Keyword searches may lead students to juxtapose resources that are not necessarily in conversation with one another. In other words, the internet is not a sentient being capable of determining whether or not the search results are necessarily related to one another.
   5.1.4. The availability bias: Something that is more widely available isn’t necessarily more relevant.
   5.1.5. The FUTOn (full text online) bias, a type of availability bias? There is a tendency to lend authority to open-access resources over and above texts that are not for free available online.