Framing a Good “Guiding Research Question”

Classical rhetoricians and orators have written extensively on how to come up with ideas and how to develop them, and even though they meant for their sage advice to be used for training orators and lawyers, the same advice applies to writers. In all their writings (their referring to Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and others), they found that identifying inconsistencies and raising important questions were the key to good starting strategies for writing.

To frame a good question:

- Get in touch with the dissonance you feel about the topic. That means you should identify experiences in your writing context that puzzle you, challenge your values, fall short of your values or expectations about the topic, or exceed them.

- Pose questions in different ways to try out different angles. The way you frame the question leads to different avenues of inquiry. Some questions are framed to lead you to a new understanding about a subject, others lead you into identifying cultural values that affect your subject, while still others might lead you to propose a course of action or outline a solution to a problem.

- Besides the obvious following ways to frame a question (who, what, when, where), other, more effective possibilities exist that are more productive:
  - Why . . . ?
  - How . . . ?
  - To what extent . . . ?
  - In what ways . . . ?

- If applicable, add limiting and/or narrowing information to the latter part of the question to maintain a sharper focus.

- The key here in framing a good question is to write several of them until you find the best one that captures the dissonance you intend to explore in your research and that uses words and phrases that focus on the features you will explore in the paper.

- In your research proposal, try to include at least three variations of research question phrasings.