

25AC Performance in América

A Guide to Coming Up with a Good Research Question

1. Review course materials.
2. Consider the overarching course questions and how you can advance them: What are the ways in which America performs? Is it singular, or are there multiple Americas? What place do we perform America/América from, and how might place-making influence or change our relationship to what we call America? How does performance make who we are and where we belong (in sometimes multiple and overlapping ways)? What is the power of performance to align, challenge, and construct the very policy and politic of the nation?
3. Come up with key words. What key words emerge for you in the materials we have read so far? (maps, racialization, manifest destiny, the law, soil, the flag, mythos, redlining, etc.)
4. What interests you about these key words when it comes to the challenge of signifying a new vision of America? What makes it possible for you to imagine alternative futures for this country?
5. Identify what you will work with as a ‘performance.’ What is your “object of study”? There are three plays that we are reading in Unit III, which are designed for this purpose. You are not limited to these works. Find a play, a symbol, or a performance practice that would allow you to further develop your ideas based on steps 2-4. Ask yourself: Based on the material we have so far studied in this class, does this “performance” present a set of issues that could help me define further what I think needs to change in this country, its problems and dilemmas? If so, what would those changes look like, what needs to happen, and how does the play/work lead me there? Does this performance inspire me to talk about the ideas that I have about what my community and I can (not) ethically live within? What does this piece actually present to me, to audiences, to viewers? What does it do? What is its overall message? How does it fit, alter, or redress a mythos or national story? Once you find the piece that you want to work with, stick with it.
6. Finding the right question. A good research question in the humanities allows you to answer your question creatively towards new ways of thinking and action. It should be something that you already more or less think you could answer, but it isn’t entirely obvious to a general reader. Your question should be focused enough so that it frames what you want to write about. Some examples of questions are: “How does the play, X, present a future that counters the mythos of westward expansion?” or, “Can the flag be useful as a symbol of liberation in a fully inclusive America, and if so, how, or, if not, why not?” or, “How is the practice of law portrayed in X and Y, and what are these representations saying about the role of law in American society?” or, “What are the ways in which the character(s) of play X derive a sense of belonging, and how is that belonging signified or made evident in the play?”
7. Method is important in coming up with questions, because it is a test of whether or not you can answer your question. If your question is, ‘did audiences think favorably on the Avenger’s Captain America taking the lead in the world struggle against Thanos?’, then you need to ask audience members and include that as evidence in your paper. Some examples of method are: “I will attend play X, write notes on it, and interview 2-3 people after the show with a set of questions that will inform my research question... (with further explanation and the set of questions that will be asked..).” If you are unable to logistically find a way to interview people, then it will be better to choose something more analytical: “I will read play X and analyze the film version of the play along with 3 reviews and a set of critical essays on the topic of Y. ...” If you want to analyze too much or too broadly, it might not be logistical for the page length. If you are inspired to take on this assignment with more initiative, rather than choosing more, take on less or more clear choices: you might choose a specific event, a processional parade, a speech, or a symbol or gesture within a performance. Refer back to Unit 1 course readings if you need a refresher on what is performance.
8. After thinking about your method and writing it up, go back and revise your research question. Does it make sense that you could answer this question through your stated methods? Is your question specific enough to avoid feeling lost about what you are writing about? Does your question allow you some expansiveness to be able to write about what really matters in the world right now without it being too broad or general? Is it feasible to answer? Be aware, that while you may be really excited about a particular movie, it might not be the right material to analyze. Rather than the whole movie or play being your object of analysis, choose a specific moment or character. It could be just a scene of that movie, or a symbol that it invokes. Or, be open to the idea that it might NOT be the right performance to write this essay on at all. Likewise, there can be unlikely ‘objects’ to not overlook – eg. it could be the color ‘red’ on a map, or a gesture from a music video. Just make sure your question and methods line up.
9. Once you have your question and methods roughly outlined, test them. Ask your classmates. Ask your GSI. Write out your argument. Get feedback.
10. Repeat steps 1-9 as often as necessary.