

MEMO N°2: EXTRACTING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

1. THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question is at the heart of the interpretation of the essay question. It consists in finding the main issue at stake (or one of them), which the question implicitly raises, even if the topic is descriptive in appearance. Since the first theory by Aristotle to contemporary “new rhetoric”, argumentation has always been a reply to a question that the audience is interested in. In the absence of any (good) question, the audience (the jury in this case) will not be interested.

For it to be interested, one must ask oneself :

- ① **Why** is the question relevant ? All of the “Grand O” subjects, because of Sciences Po’s vocation to be a very polis-oriented school and the experience of professional internships (or supervised research), have a highly contemporary dimension and to which many reflect lively current debates (energy transition, migration, human rights, etc.)
- ② **Who** is raising the question ? This is an essential issue for controversial topics : the choice of economic policy, societal issues, international conflicts, memorial controversies, etc.
- ③ **How** is it raised ? This is the heart of the research question. Watch out for PARADOXES, which constitute the relevance of most essay questions. To raise such a paradox is the best way to achieve good results. At the stage of graduate studies such an expectation from the institution towards its students is justified.

2. THE BEST WAY TO COME UP WITH A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION IS THE FOLLOWING

Le meilleur cheminement pour parvenir à une bonne problématique est le suivant :

- ① Start from the **QUESTION** asked in the issue (explicitly or implicitly): For instance, “France’s soft power” (PSIA) means “Does France have a significant soft power and what are its features?”. At this stage a clear definition of the main notions (here “soft” and “hard” power) is of course required.
- ② Extricate the **PROBLEM** at stake. Here: France, long the first European power, has known a long relative decline, increased by globalization, in the world ranking of power according to the classical criteria of hard power: territorial, demographic, economic, military.
- ③ Formulate the **RESEARCH QUESTION** in which the issue inserts itself. In our example, a good research question is to reflect on whether France compensates, and if yes, to which extent, by its soft power (influence exercised through image, culture, diplomatic tradition, historical links, etc.) its rank which is now an average one in terms of hard power. The notion of smart power, which combines soft and hard powers and which seems more adapted to a world in which the distinction between the two types of power is blurred (cf. big data control, knowledge economy), will allow to answer (positively or negatively) to the question. We measure here how the importance of a very precise definition of the terms and fundamental bibliographical references (Joseph Nye in this case, but also... Machiavelli !) are indispensable.