Step 1A in Writing a Good Product: Canvas Your Domain

There are two "first steps" in writing a good product that really must be done simultaneously. These are: **canvassing your domain** and **asking a good question**. What I am calling canvassing your domain includes getting to know your topic, identifying key sources of information and expertise on your area, understanding current and historical processes that produced the present landscape, and developing critical insights into your topic through research. Now, in order to identify the domain you ought to be investigating, you need a really good question. But in order to come up with a truly good question, you need to know the topic area well. That is why these two steps must be done in relation to each other, to establish a feedback loop between the question you're asking and the topic you're researching. Allowing these two processes to inform each other is how you begin to write a product that is **narrow enough to be thorough**, and **knowledgeable enough to be insightful**. This first section provides resources and processes for canvassing your domain. The following section will address ways of drafting and refining your research question.

Use the table below to keep track of your sources. As you come across information or materials you think are useful for your product, save the links below in the appropriate category. This can also serve as an indicator of how your product's supporting information might be more well-rounded. If you notice that your supporting evidence is all news articles, try to find academic analysis of the events you reference to provide a more robust understanding of the dots you're connecting on your own. If you notice that all your sources are books or historical perspectives, try to include current events articles or videos or podcasts to make sure that your information is still relevant to present-day dynamics.

If you are concerned that any of your sources may be less than credible, highlight that source in red and see if you can find an alternative outlet that corroborates the information you are interested in.

SOURCE BANK				
News Articles // Opinion-Eds	**Analysis Pieces**	**Books**	**Videos // Podcasts**	**Other**

Use the template below to complete your literature review matrix. This matrix is designed to help you group sources according to themes or ideas, which can give a coherence to the way you incorporate supporting sources. The main thing to avoid when doing a literature review is just listing or regurgitating information you heard somewhere. You have collected supporting evidence for a **purpose** (i.e. to provide insight into a particular question). Therefore, your presentation of supporting evidence should clearly fulfill that purpose. Grouping sources according to theme will help you identify sources that are not strong contributors to your thesis. **These sources should be left out.** There are no extra points for a bibliography cluttered with sources you didn't really use or need. Do not try to awkwardly shoehorn sentences and paragraphs into your product that cite experts or ideas just for the sake of length or variety. Stick to your purpose (your question), support it, and remember your audience – be okay with leaving information out.

Note: This does not mean you should *not* include sources that provide the counterargument or that disagree with your general insights. Often, two authors might be writing on the *same theme* and come to different conclusions. It's okay to include both as a way of thoroughly exploring your topic in a constructive manner. Being able to recognize and articulate the important themes in a certain strain of discourse will hugely benefit you in your academic career.

Literature Review Matrix
1. State your research question.
2. Identify themes or guiding questions surfacing from your notes about your research.
3. List the key sources (in shorthand – just name or outlet).
4. Summarize key point(s) from each source relating to the theme. *Tip: include the page numbers in the matrix to help you build your bibliography.*
5. Revise themes. Tip: state each theme as a new precise research question.

Research Question:				
Theme	Sources			

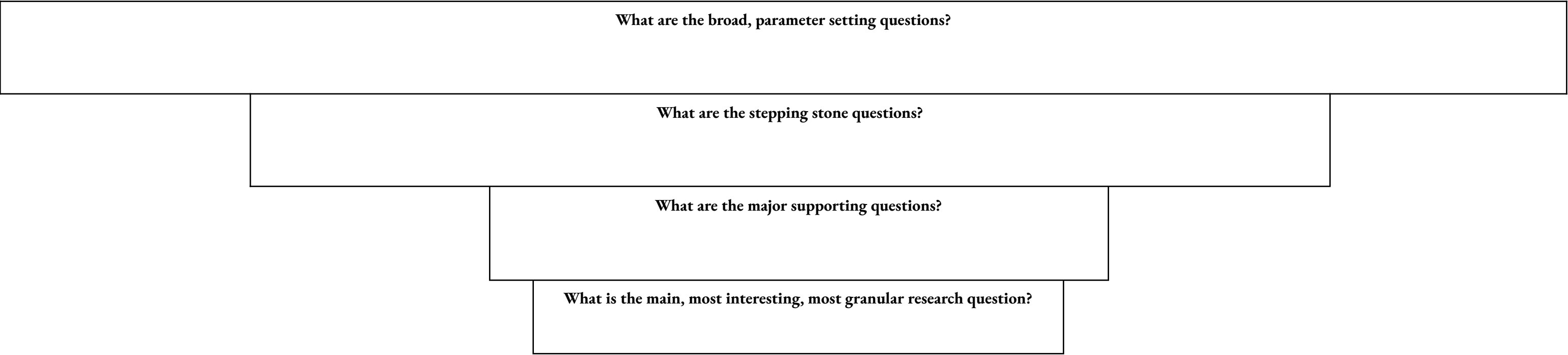# Step 1B in Writing a Good Product: Ask a Good Question

A good question is well-informed, precise, judicable, and hopefully hits at something interesting and new. This section provides tools and methods for drafting and refining a good question that frames and directs your product.

Mind Mapping
Mind mapping is a brainstorming tool that allows you to dump all related ideas into a single space and draw connections between them. You can do this by drawing lines and arrows between ideas or by drawing concentric circles or venn diagrams. There are several extensions and applications for mind mapping available (there is a Chat GPT enabled mind map extension for Google Docs and digital whiteboard tools like Mural) but you can also just use old school pen and paper. The purpose of a mind map is to think about how concepts, disciplines, sub-fields and approaches work together and build on one another. In the process of creating a mind map you can highlight where you think gaps are in the discussion, interesting connections that you think *should* be made but have not yet been made. It should help you identify where the conversation has already been and ensure that your product does not simply repeat ideas that have already been articulated. As you create the map of your topic area, ask yourself: Where are the major nodes of thought? What are the most important conceptual connections? How or where can I progress the conversation in this domain?

Inverted Pyramid
Another method for drafting a good question is to ask multiple questions, narrowing the focus each time. This inverted pyramid starts with the broadest framing questions first and gradually asks more precise questions until you finally land on your research question. Use the template below to help draft supporting questions and see the progression of ideas and concepts. Don't be afraid to ask "bad" or boring questions at first! As you become more familiar with the scholarship and domain you will be able to progressively refine your questions.

What are the broad, parameter setting questions?

What are the stepping stone questions?

What are the major supporting questions?

What is the main, most interesting, most granular research question?

Refining and Redirecting
Finally, as you refine your question, consider the following probing questions to ensure that your question is as precise as possible.
- Is there a timeframe that would help bound your research?
- Are you specifying the right actor? Or are you looking at too broad an agent?
- Evaluate the verbs in your question: Are they passive or active?
  - Passive verbs are appropriate if you're interested in studying *what* happened, not who or why.
  - Active verbs are better for analyzing responsible actors and causes (*who* or *why*).
- Pay attention to word choice: Are your verbs, adverbs, and adjectives descriptive?
- Understand your terms: Are you using terms and concepts in a manner consistent with scholarship and conversation surrounding this topic?