Curiosity & Questions:

A starting point for those who don’t have a list of research questions lying around, and a strategy for those that don’t know where to start even if they do have a question.

Find a Research Question:

1. Fall Down the Rabbit Hole
   1. If you don’t have any idea of a topic that interests you, set a timer for a 10-15 min. Pick a relevant source that has a lot of various information about the area you are doing a project on.
   2. Things to Fall After:
      1. Policy area: human rights, environment, armed conflict, etc.
      2. Region of the world: Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle-East, “The Stans,” etc.
   3. Places to Fall: (if you have absolutely no idea)
      1. The United Nations Global Issues Overview
      2. Our World in Data
      3. Google News – World
      4. BBC News – World
2. Find What Sparks Your Interest
   1. Take out a piece of paper and draw a “Brainstorm Map.”
      1. Concepts you find interesting.
      2. Countries you find interesting.
   2. List as many news stories as you’ve heard lately that you found remotely interesting.
      1. Interesting = “willing to click on.”
      2. Interesting = “had a question about.” (Even if it was only ?????)
      3. The bar is low for ‘interesting.’
   3. Redraw your Brainstorm Map.
      1. Pick three things you find the most interesting (they can be themes/common threads). Put them in a triangle at the center.
      2. Draw a new brainstorm map around them.
      3. Find a partner. Explain your latest Brainstorm Map and what you find interesting/puzzling/would like to know more about.
         1. What did you spend the most time talking about? / Enjoyed explaining what little you knew the most? That’s your topic.

*Sidenote: Your topic doesn’t have to be something super fascinating to you. It can alternatively be something that is important – for example: something a certain audience should know more about.*

* 1. Turn It Into A Question.
     1. There are different levels of questions. Here are two.
        1. Book / Dissertation: A question that will require researching multiple aspects of a phenomena in order to adequately answer it. (Ex: When do states join treaties with Child-Early-Forced-Marriage (CEFM) provisions and then change their domestic laws and practices accordingly?)
        2. Research Paper / Article: A question that focuses on one aspect of a phenomena. (Ex: When do states choose to ratify treaties with child marriage provisions?)
     2. Start with listing as many questions as possible about your chosen topic.
        1. Who, What, Where, When, Why, How?
           1. Make sure to consider variations across time and space (across different countries / regions, etc.)
        2. Some will be simple questions to answer with only a little research. Some will require more work. If you need guidance – make a short list of questions that require some-to-more work in answering, and discuss with your instructor via email / office hours / before or after class.
     3. Rule of Thumb.
        1. Your question should follow the “How does X affect Y?” framework.

Once You Have a Research Question:

**The Basics:**

1. What is your issue?
   1. Define the topic. What is the problem or conflict to be discussed or resolved?
   2. What level of analysis does it operate at?
   3. How does focusing on a particular level of analysis change your question or draft-explanation?
      1. For international relations projects, practice defining it at each level of analysis, then choose the most relevant one.
2. What does your issue involve?
   1. Who are the key actors and institutions?
   2. What are their interests?
   3. What are the main interactions?
3. How did the issue come about?
   1. How did the issue arise?
   2. Has it been going on for a long time? If so, how ahs the issue changed over time?
4. What are the main viewpoints of the issue?
   1. Discuss at least two viewpoints. Compare the validity of these viewpoints.
   2. How does each viewpoint propose the issue be resolved?
5. How can your issue be resolved?
   1. What are the paths to resolving the issue? (Political and/or policy)
   2. What is the likelihood of each of these paths happening in practical terms? What are the pros and cons of these solutions? What are the probabilities that any of these solutions will actually happen?

**Expand it:**

1. Create two concept maps:
   1. All the actors involved with your issue.
   2. All the issue/policy areas involved with your issue.
2. Either explain these relationships to a friend. Or write short paragraph descriptions. Consider:
   1. Actors & institutions
   2. Direct & indirect comparisons.
   3. Causes & effects
   4. Inputs & outputs