specific and narrowly focused. But first see whether the list welcomes questions from students. (If you can't find a list using a search engine, ask a teacher or visit the Web site of professional organizations in your field.)

3.3.7 Evaluate Your Questions

When you run out of questions, evaluate them, because not all questions are equally good. Look for questions whose answers might make you (and, ideally, your readers) think about your topic in a new way. Avoid questions like these:

- Their answers are settled fact that you could just look up. *Do the Inuit use masks in their wedding ceremonies?* Questions that ask *how* and *why* invite deeper thinking than *who, what, when,* or *where,* and deeper thinking leads to more interesting answers.
- Their answers would be merely speculative. *Would church services be as well attended if the congregation all wore masks?* If you can't imagine finding hard data that might settle the question, it's a question you can't settle.
- Their answers are dead ends. *How many black cats slept in the Alamo the night before the battle?* It is hard to see how an answer would help us think about any larger issue worth understanding better, so it's a question that's probably not worth asking.

You might, however, be wrong about that. Some questions that seemed trivial, even silly, have answers more significant than expected. One researcher wondered why a coffee spill dries up in the form of a ring and discovered things about the properties of fluids that others in his field thought important—and that paint manufacturers found valuable. So who knows where a question about cats in the Alamo might take you? You can't know until you get there.

Once you have a few promising questions, try to combine them into larger ones. For example, many questions about the Alamo

story ask about the interests of the storytellers and their effects on their stories: *How have politicians used the story? How have the storytellers' motives changed? Whose purposes does each story serve?* These can be combined into a single more significant question:

> How and why have users of the Alamo story given the event a mythic quality?

With only a topic to guide your research, you can find endless data and will never know when you have enough (much less what to do with it). To go beyond fact-grubbing, find a question that will narrow your search to just those data you need to answer it.

3.4 FROM A QUESTION TO ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Even if you are an experienced researcher, you might not be able to take the next step until you are well into your project, and if you are a beginner, you may find it deeply frustrating. Even so, once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: *So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking?* You might not be able to answer that *So what?* question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

Think of it like this: What will be lost if you *don't* answer your question? How will *not* answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do? Start by asking *So what?* at first of yourself:

> So what if I don't know or understand how butterflies know where to go in the winter, or how fifteenth-century musicians tuned their instruments, or why the Alamo story has become a myth? So what if I can't answer my question? What do we lose?

Your answer might be *Nothing. I just want to know.* Good enough to start, but not to finish, because eventually your readers will ask as well, and they will want an answer beyond *Just curious.* Answering *So what?* vexes all researchers, beginners and experienced alike, because when you have only a question, it's hard to predict

whether others will think its answer is significant. But you must work toward that answer throughout your project. You can do that in three steps.

3.4.1 Step 1: Name Your Topic

If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmerings of a good question or two, start by naming your project:

I am trying to learn about (working on, studying) _____.

Fill in the blank with your topic, using some of those nouns derived from verbs:

I am studying the *causes* of the *disappearance* of large North American mammals . . .

I am working on Lincoln's *beliefs* about *predestination* and their *influence* on his *reasoning* . . .

3.4.2 Step 2: Add an Indirect Question

Add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about your topic:

1. I am studying/working on _____
2. **because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how _____.**

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
2. **because I want to find out whether they were hunted to extinction . . .**

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and its influence on his reasoning
2. **because I want to find out how his belief in destiny influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War . . .**

When you add that *because I want to find out how/why/whether* clause, you state why *you* are pursuing your topic: to answer a question important to you.

If you are a new researcher and get this far, congratulate yourself, because you have moved beyond the aimless collection of data. But now, if you can, take one step more. It's one that advanced researchers know they must take, because they know their work will be judged not by its significance to them but by its significance to others in their field. They must have an answer to *So what?*

3.4.3 Step 3: Answer *So What?* by Motivating Your Question

This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that explains why you asked your first question. Introduce this second implied question with *in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether*:

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
2. because I want to find out whether the earliest peoples hunted them to extinction
3. **in order to help my reader understand whether native peoples lived in harmony with nature or helped destroy it.**

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning
2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,
3. **in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs may have influenced his military decisions.**

It is the indirect question in step 3 that you hope will seize your readers' interest. If it touches on issues important to your field, even indirectly, then your readers should care about its answer.

Some advanced researchers begin with questions that others in their field already care about: *Why did the giant sloth and woolly mammoth disappear from North America?* Or: *Is risk taking genetically based?* But many researchers, including at times the three of us, find that they can't flesh out the last step in that three-part sentence until they finish a first draft. So you make no mistake *begin-*