Quick tips for EE research topics/questions in History

One tip to narrow a topic is to think of time, space, and theme.

The liquids can be adjusted but all three must be in the glass. (e.g. To have more space, one must narrow the time and/or the theme.)

Too Broad:
The impact of Galileo on European science during the scientific revolution.
Time = The scientific Revolution (1543-1687)
Space = Europe
Theme = Scientific impact (in all possible forms)

Better:
Galileo’s use of scripture in his personal letters of 1615-1632.
Time = 1615-1632
Space = Letters sent from Galileo
Theme = Use of scripture in the letters

General Questions that come from this topic:
1. How (if at all) did Galileo’s use of scripture change from 1616 to his book’s publication in 1632?
2. If there was a change, WHY did it change? What factors contributed to the change.
3. If there was no change, what consistent themes and uses did he use, and what factors influenced him to use scripture the way he did?

Be careful when a question start to go in a different direction. Another question that might emerge from the above is:
4. Did Galileo’s use of scripture impact people’s perception of his work? In What ways?

Notice how the question changes the focus from Galileo’s use to people’s perception. It broadens the topic back to a level that is difficult to answer in the space provided.
Time = 1615-1632
Space = people — Which people? All of them?
Theme = Impact of scripture (are there different forms of impact?)
Another tip is to think about **measurement**:

Using question 4:  
**How will you measure the “impact Galileo’s use of scripture had on people”?**

Using Question 3:  
**How will you measure the the relative significance of the factors that contributed to the change.**

Finally, **materials** and access to them:

I like to use the word archives, but it is not limited to primary source material. The question is, in order to measure something, what data and sources will you need to access.

**What sources do you need to access to do the evaluation you just said you wanted to measure?**  
**Will it require interviews?**  
**Will it require primary sources?**  
**Are there online versions of what you need?**  
**Will you be able to physically get to the sources if they are not available online?**

For Questions 1-3, do you have access to Galileo’s letters in a language that you can understand?

For Question 4, do you have access to the writings of those discussing Galileo’s letters in a language that you can understand?
Doing secondary source research

One tip when you want to do research in an area that primary sources are not available to you, is to look at what secondary sources are saying about a topic and ask “What are these sources NOT saying?”

AND/OR

Is there a different perspective that I can look at that is different from the perspectives I see in the historians’ books?

AND/OR

Can I combine ideas to create new research questions. Can I look at books about the Cold War, and look at books about Rock and Roll and then research about the impact of the Cold War on Rock and Roll or Rock and Roll’s impact on the Cold War? (Too Broad - see page 1 about “Time, Space, and Theme”)

Concern:
What if I find a book or documentary or something specifically on the Cold War and Rock and Roll (that answers the exact question I am asking)?

First - If a whole book was written on it, I told you it was too broad.

Second - Then you should go back to the first question on this page, “What is the source not saying?” And then work though the questions again.

This is why background reading and an appropriate starting bibliography is so important.

You never want a topic/paper that basically says “For a better or more-in-depth answer to this question see this or that book or watch this or that film.”