***What it is:***

An exercise in which the instructor and the students arrive *collaboratively* at the “prompt” for an essay involving sources that the class has read together. It is intended for small, discussion-based classes with a writing component.

***How it Works:***

This exercise will take two classes.

1. In class, frame this assignment as an exercise in building skills—specifically, the critical thinking skills of asking good questions and framing a research problem.

Points to cover will depend on the level of the class. Possibilities include:

* creating meaningful new knowledge;
* thinking and writing within a discipline;
* becoming better readers of essay prompts students are likely to encounter in other classes;
* what constitutes a good critical question

1. Provide a template for what makes a good essay prompt. Here is an example drawn from CR 1313 (Critical Reasoning). Use it or adapt it as you see fit.

**A Good Prompt:**

* Draws on a either a single source or multiple sources.
* Provides a brief synopsis of the source(s), focusing attention on details that offer opportunities for critical thinking.
* Is relevant to the subject matter.
* Identifies an issue, a problem, an analytical task the source or sources pose.
* Finds the “sweet spot” between being overly prescriptive (giving granular directions about how to proceed in answering the question) and too general or vague (offering so little direction that the person responding has no guidance). A good prompt “leads” the writer, but allows for individual thinking and creativity.

1. If relevant or practicable, have students look back at a previous assignment to see how it meets the criteria in the template.

The point here is to encourage students to think like the instructor: to see how the prompt contains an implicit answer to the question of “What does the teacher want?”

1. Turn to the material of the current essay—the one for which students are helping to write the prompt. Guide the students through a discussion with questions like the following:
   * Is there a puzzling tension or dissonance in the primary text--or between texts--that creates compelling analytical opportunities?
   * Do some secondary materials provide interesting means for exploring those tensions?
   * What kind of problem about the text can these secondary sources illuminate? That is: how can we move beyond simple compare/contrast in the service of an analytical point?
2. Give the students time to draft their own essay prompts. They can do this in class for about twenty minutes; or they can do it as homework.
3. For the next class, select some of the promising drafts and circulate them.
4. In class, ask students which ones they would want to write about—and why.
5. Lead students through an exercise of workshopping the raw material into an edited draft of the prompt.

***Further considerations:***

As carried out in the Critical Reasoning course for which this exercise was developed, it serves as preparation for a stand-alone essay that is itself part of a sequence of essays, each of which builds upon the skills emphasized in the previous one. For the first essay, the students are given a prompt they had no hand in designing. At the end of the semester, the students choose research topics and produce essays on those topics. This exercise prepares them to ask their own questions for that final essay.