What makes a question decent?

An EPQ is not a description of events – it is analysis (comparison) of academic interpretations of an event or thing. What you are looking for is a concise topic where there are competing explanations about the event in question – a good EPQ weighs up different arguments.

These are real questions asked and my thoughts about each one;

1. Is archaeology from space a method which can significantly contribute to archaeological discovery in the future?

The question above is too unspecific – there are different ways of doing archaeology from space to begin with and just asking about archaeology in general is unhelpful. This question should be changed – the only area for comparison in the question is 'significantly' – so maybe 'assess effective ways in which archaeology from space has helped archaeological discovery' (So in comparison to other methods, like pollen counting or carbon dating). I'd also like the question to be more specific – so what case studies – which you'll only learn by having a background knowledge? Maybe 'Assess the effectiveness of Space Archaeology in the discovery of Mayan ruins'. Also 'in the future' is a problematic phrase– what? 100 years from now? 1000 years?

2. To what extent was the culture of The Weimar Republic inherently fascistic

This is a better question but it still leaves a large scope for any answer (what does inherently fascistic mean for example? – or sociological theories of culture? This is a huge problem with the expression 'To what extent' – avoid this phrase if possible). Here, the author was actually interested in the impact of films produced by the Weimar Republic such as Metropolis. So a better question would have reflected this interest – 'Did the films of Weimar Germany help the rise of Fascism?' – this question still needs clarity but this can be done by knowing say 10-15 major films produced and looking at impact.

3. Assess the impacts of recent changes to the legal aid system in the UK, from 2010-2016

This is a much more focused question and allows for analysis and evaluation. However it could do with a focus like cuts due to austerity or impact of family law for instance

4. Would Japan's approach to architectural design of earthquake resistant buildings be favourable to other countries of fault lines?

This question is far too complicated to be attempted – for a start Japan has a myriad of approaches so is not a single entity. Also to other countries is far too vague. Architectural design is also highly unspecific. Here, the author was interested in earthquake resistance so probably should have looked at a much more simple version of the question. Something like 'Can earthquake resistance on buildings be done on the cheap? Assess current materials used in earthquake zones'. Ideally, this project should have turned into an artefact where the candidate looked at how materials are tested and then perhaps even conducted their own experiment. The candidate was interested in studying architecture at university so could have developed models also.

5. Are current IT systems at a functional standard to sustain an operational NHS healthcare service?

This is a decent question which allows for scope to analyse and evaluate. This candidate started by wanting to look at the efficacy of a type of injection (Medicine student) but realised that she wasn't able to find much out but did come across a major debate whilst looking at relevant literature.

6. Should the representation of women's gender roles represented in modern television advertisement in western societies be altered?

This is a poor question – for a start it's too vague ('western societies?). Also 'modern TV' is a worryingly large concept. It also could be answered in one word – yes. The candidate here was interested in media portrayal of gender so they should have been more specific – 'Is it time to ban half time adverts in the UK for their stereotypical portrayal of gender?' It might even be worthwhile looking at an industry (i.e. car manufacturers) as the topic is still fairly large. Even this might be seen as a leading question – so maybe a better version would be 'Is women's roles in TV adverts at peak time (during children's tv scheduling?) TV a fair reflection of women's roles in society? Here the emphasis would be on analysing types of roles depicted and then looking at the types of roles women actually perform in society. This becomes a social science experiment and much more appropriate.

In short;

1. The question should be analytical (allowing you to compare and to evaluate).
2. The question should not be descriptive
3. The question should be focused
4. The question should not be leading
5. The question should reflect what you are going to write about
6. The question should be improved upon as you do research - don't get stuck at the start with an inflexible question – charting how you modify your question in your log book will get you credit.

EPQ guidance – How much research should I do

The only way you'll get to a question is if you look at different sources. 100 hours reading is expected.

Research should be a mix of books, journals and newspaper articles. One of my major issues is that students read texts and take whatever is said completely uncritically. When you read a text – look at the reviews, look at the criticism, follow this up. In short – read something and try to find material that falsifies it.

Please record where you found your material – sources are essential to keep on top of.

Appropriate amounts of research?

Example 1

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Detailed use of relevant resources – journal articles, academic texts, appropriate level, wide reading – clear bibliography. (A* possibly)

EXAMPLE 2

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Example 3

[1] Mapping Archaeological Landscapes from Space Douglas C. Comer – Michael J. Harrower – page 114.
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This is another section – this candidate used footnotes rather than a bibliography. This to me says the candidate has read one book. There is no evaluation of sources. (U probably)

Example 4

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This is a pretty comprehensive selection of appropriate material. The candidate has clearly looked around and found relevant material (A*)

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This bibliography is weak – many of the sources are not academic – the oxford dictionary? Investopedia? It also references an AS politics textbook (Heywood). There is an absence of academic journals – this EPQ was about the financial crisis – there are plenty of economists who have written about this – none of which appear here. (possibly C or D)

6.
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This was for an artefact – this is a very poor bibliography – you can tell by looking at this that whatever has been written will be a very poorly researched. The candidate here was looking at comic book art – so where are the references to actual comics (U)?

The expectation is that you put in 120 hours of reading – if your bibliography does not reflect this then it is fairly obvious.

Also use Word for helping organise citations.

PRODUCTION LOG?

Production log – I have put on the website a pdf version – there is a word version on the AQA website. The candidate record form can be found here;

https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/projects/project-qualifications/EPQ-7993/administration

You must use this to record your thoughts and your journey – it forms a major part of your submission (at least 33% of the marks).

You should keep a research diary as well – this should be a book or file where you record your ideas and what you have read. You can photocopy this (or at least certain pages) for any submission – it will help. You can evaluate sources in a diary.

Appropriate = reflecting on journey and agency – remember this is your project – so when myself or a supervisor says they think you should do x or y or z – you make a choice whether to accept that advice or not. Any decisions made are by you and not by anyone else. If you need help you need to find it – you need to start those conversations – supervisors are not going to chase anyone up. I do not have regular meetings unless the candidate asks for it. If you get to February 2021 and you don't know what you are doing that is your problem – and you need to find a solution to it.

Keep on top of the log – by September you should have filled in pages 5-9, and completed a large amount of reading – you should really be looking for a mid-project review in about September/October as this is where you will finalise your EPQ. Also remember to date sections and be chronologically accurate – in exam board land this document is to be filled in chronologically and errors do get noticed (and marks deducted). It's possible to fill in 2 or 3 starts for a project to show thought in finding the actual topic to be investigated.

Hopefully, when you come back in September you will need to meet with me to see how far you have progressed with your EPQ. At this point, if sufficient work has been done you will get allocated a supervisor and you will be able to use the EPQ to get home study. When you get your supervisor allocated in late September you must arrange regular meetings. Regular meetings means every couple of weeks. Supervisors are asked to record when they meet and this can be used as evidence for marking your work. It is critical that you talk with me or your supervisor throughout this project.