

WRITING A RESEARCH QUESTION

What is a research question?

A research question is a clear, focused, concise, complex and arguable question that will lay the groundwork for a thesis by offering a focus for your exploration of a topic that interests you.

Although a strong research question is a good place to start your thesis, you should be prepared for it to change as you carry out primary and secondary research.

What are the steps to writing a research question?

The following steps are merely a guideline for the very beginning of the process of writing a research question. You might not follow them in exact order and you might return to or move between them at different points in your research process.

1. Choose a general topic that interests you. The process will start broadly and then narrow as you begin the research process. General topics might include broad issues such as “literacy” or “body image.”
2. Do some preliminary research on your general topic. Consult periodicals and journals on your topic to see what has been explored in depth and what holes might remain.
3. Start asking questions. Taking into consideration the above, start asking yourself “how” and “why” questions about your general topic. For example, “Why is there a correlation between poverty and childhood illiteracy?” or “How can public health officials respond to body image issues in young women?”
4. Evaluate your question. At several stages in your research process, you will want to come back to “test” your research question to make sure it still meets your research objectives. Use the ideas below about what makes a good research question to evaluate your question.

What makes a good research question?

None of these are absolute rules (except, perhaps, the first and the last), but rather goals to reach toward through the process of writing and revising your research question.

INTERESTING: You'll be spending almost two full years with this topic, so you will want to choose something that excites you enough to keep you going through the long researching, designing and writing process.

CLEAR: A good research question avoids vague words.

Too vague: *Why are social networking sites harmful?*

This question may be a good place to start but it is too vague to effectively guide a thesis project to its conclusion. It does not specify which social networking sites or state what harm (physical? emotional? financial?) is being caused to whom. Moreover, this question takes as a given that this "harm" exists.

Clear: *How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter?*

With this question, you are able to clearly understand all the variables at play. It not only specifies the sites (Facebook and Twitter), but also the type of harm (privacy issues) and who is harmed (online users).

FOCUSED: A good research question narrows the focus of the research to a manageable level for the project at hand.

Too Broad: *How do we fight illiteracy?*

This question certainly addresses a real issue but it will yield too many answers for you to be able to effectively deal with in a single thesis. Again, it is a good place to start but far too broad to carry on very far.

Focused: *How can an internet-based design tool be designed to increase interest in reading amongst primary school boys in Canada?*

This question is still complex, but it offers a much more manageable task.

COMPLEX: A research question should never yield a simple yes or no answer. Rather, it should open up possibilities for primary and secondary research and complex discussions.

Too simple: *How many women in Canada between the ages of 18 and 34 are obese?*

This question can be answered with a simple statistic.

Complex: *How might childhood education tools be designed to help prevent obesity within Canadian women?*

ARGUABLE: Your research question should offer up an opportunity for you to take an arguable position—that is, one that others may disagree with and that can be supported by evidence.

RAISES A PROBLEM: This is particularly important in design research and is a consideration you will return to again and again throughout the research process. Before you start investigating a designed outcome (which is what most design research centres around), you need first to identify a real-world problem that your outcome can address or question.

CONCISE: The final version of your research question will be quite concise, with no unnecessary qualifiers. But this need not be a major consideration early in your research process.

Links

http://www.griffith.edu.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0007/555217/Examining-a-Thesis-in-the-Visual-Arts.pdG.Petelinf.pdf

<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/questions.htm>

<http://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/research/research-paper-steps/developing-questions/>

Exercise

Sketch out a rough research question about a topic that excites you.

Share with a classmate or colleague

Ask them the following questions:

1. Is it interesting? Why or why not?
2. What is the greater problem the answer to this question might address?
3. What debates does this question touches on?
4. What kind of research can you imagine coming from this topic?
5. Is the question easily and fully researchable? (Will the researcher have access to the primary and secondary research required to do justice to this topic?)
6. How might this question be too limited or too broad?
7. Are there any words that are vague or unclear?