How to Write a Research Question

Tishk International University,

Education Faculty, Biology Dept,

Research Methodology, 4th Grade/W2

Asst. Lect. Neslihan Oztas

What is a research question?

- The research question is one of the most important parts of your research project, thesis or dissertation. It's important to spend some time assessing and refining your question before you get started.

It should be:

- **clear**: it provides enough specifics that one's audience can easily understand its purpose without needing additional explanation.
- **focused**: it is narrow enough that it can be answered thoroughly in the space the writing task allows.
- **concise**: it is expressed in the fewest possible words.
- **complex**: it is not answerable with a simple "yes" or "no," but rather requires synthesis and analysis of ideas and sources prior to composition of an answer.
- **arguable**: its potential answers are open to debate rather than accepted facts.

Why is a research question essential to the research process?

- Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process. The specificity of a well-developed research question helps writers avoid the "all-about" paper and work toward supporting a specific, arguable thesis.

Steps to developing a research question:

- ***1) Choose an interesting general topic:***

- Most professional researchers focus on topics they are truly interested in studying.

- Writers should choose a broad topic about which they exactly would like to know more. An example of a general topic might be "Slavery in the American South" or "Films of the 1930s."

- ***2) Do some preliminary research on your general topic:***

- Do a few quick searches in current review and journals on your topic to see what's already been done and to help you narrow your focus.

- What issues are scholars and researchers discussing, when it comes to your topic? What questions occur to you as you read these articles?

- *3) Consider your audience:*

- For most college papers, your audience will be academic, but always keep your audience in mind when narrowing your topic and developing your question. Would that particular audience be interested in the question you are developing?

- **4) Start asking questions:**
- Taking into consideration all of the above, start asking yourself open-ended "how" and "why" questions about your general topic.
- For example, "Why were slave narratives effective tools in working toward the abolishment of slavery?" or "How did the films of the 1930s reflect or respond to the conditions of the Great Depression?"

- *5) Evaluate your question:*
- After you've put a question or even a couple of questions down on paper, evaluate these questions to determine whether they would be effective research questions or whether they need more revising and refining.
  - *Is your research question clear?* With so much research available on any given topic, research questions must be as clear as possible in order to be effective in helping the writer direct his or her research.
  - *Is your research question focused?* Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.
  - *Is your research question complex?* Research questions should not be answerable with a simple "yes" or "no" or by easily-found facts. They should, instead, require both research and analysis on the part of the writer. They often begin with "How" or "Why."

- ***6) Begin your research:***

- After you've come up with a question, think about the possible paths your research could take. What sources should you consult as you seek answers to your question? What research process will ensure that you find a variety of perspectives and responses to your question?

Sample Research Questions

- **Unclear:** *How should social networking sites address the harm they cause?*
  Clear: *What action should social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook take to protect users' personal information and privacy?*

  The unclear version of this question doesn't specify which social networking sites or suggest what kind of harm the sites might be causing. It also assumes that this "harm" is proven and/or accepted. The clearer version specifies sites (MySpace and Facebook), the type of potential harm (privacy issues), and who may be experiencing that harm (users). A strong research question should never leave place for uncertainty or interpretation.

- **Unfocused:** *What is the effect on the environment from global warming?*
Focused: *What is the most significant effect of glacial melting on the lives of penguins in Antarctica?*

- The unfocused research question is so broad that it couldn't be adequately answered in your research paper. The focused version narrows down to a specific effect of global warming (glacial melting), a specific place (Antarctica), and a specific animal that is affected (penguins). It also requires the writer to take a status on which effect has the greatest impact on the affected animal. When in doubt, make a research question as narrow and focused as possible.

- **Too simple:** *How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?* **Appropriately Complex:** *What main environmental, behavioral, and genetic factors predict whether Americans will develop diabetes, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?*

- The simple version of this question can be looked up online and answered in a few factual sentences; it leaves no place for analysis. The more complex version is written in two parts; it is thought provoking and requires both significant investigation and evaluation from the writer. As a general rule, if a quick Google search can answer a research question, it's likely not very effective.

Recommended sources for journal articles

Subject	Journal source
General	JSTOR
	Google Scholar
	Oxford Academic, part of the Oxford University Press
	Microsoft Academic
	Cornell University Library
	SAGE Publishing
	Taylor and Francis Online
	Academic Journals
	OAIster
	Directory of Open Access Journals
Science	Science Mag
	OMICS International
	American Association for the Advancement of Science
	Public Library of Science (PLOS Journals)
	Medline
	PubMed
	Inspec
Mathematics	Springer publications
	American Mathematical Society
Humanities and social sciences	Project Muse
Literature	American Comparative Literature Association
Philosophy	PhilPapers