

A guide to research questions

What is a research question?

A research question is a clear, concise, focused and arguable question which you build your research around. You will be working with this question throughout the whole of your research, so make sure that it is something that you are genuinely interested in. A research question is the basis for any dissertation research. All methodological features of the research come from the creation of these questions. It is important to have a clear and strong research question as a poorly formulated research question can lead to unrelated research findings and disjointed research projects.



How to construct a good research question

Research questions should follow on from the statement of the research problem. Research questions should narrow content or methodological gaps in the literature, they should also be evaluated in terms of social significance and feasibility. The research questions should be consistent with the title of the dissertation as well as the elements of the literature presented in the introduction.

Steps to building a good research question

Choose a general topic that interests you

Even though it is academic research, you should focus on a topic that you have an interest in. This will allow you to be more easily engaged in the research process.

Do some preliminary research on your chosen topic

Before you make your final decision of your research question do a few preliminary internet, book and journal searches. This will allow you to see what research has already been done and will help you to narrow down your general topic into a research question.

Keep your audience in mind

For most papers and dissertations your audience will be people in academia. Keep this in mind when you are forming your question – what will be of interest to your audience?

Start asking questions

Thinking about all of the points that have been mentioned above, start asking “how” and “why” questions to build up a shortlist of possible research questions. For example if your research topic is about the impact of the internet on learning, you could start asking questions like “*how* has the development of the internet had an impact on a student’s learning” or “*why* has the way that student’s learn changed since the development of the internet”

Evaluate your question

Is your research question as clear as possible? Your question should be clear in order to effectively direct your research.

Is your research question as focused as possible? Your research question should be specific, so that you can cover the research that is necessary, whilst keeping your research focused.

Is your research question complicated enough? You should not be able to answer your research question with a “yes”, a “no” or an easily researched answer. It should require both research and analyse by the writer.

Consider where your question will take your research

After you’ve decided on your question, think about how your question will direct your research. Where do you think that your research will take you? What arguments are you hoping to make?

General guidelines

- Make sure that your question is clear, concise, focused and feasible
- You do not need any references for your research questions.
- For some dissertation research, only one research question is necessary, for others you may need multiple questions. If you are unsure whether you need one research question or multiple contact your academic tutor.
- In qualitative studies, not all of the research questions are necessarily known at the time the dissertation is initially designed. Additional research questions may emerge during data collection as important new variables are identified.

References

Developed from original works:

Sampson, J. Jr.. (2012). *A Guide to Quantitative and Qualitative Dissertation Research*. Available: http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/edpsy_faculty_publications/1. Last accessed 20/02/14.

The Writing Center. (2009). *How to write a research question*. Available: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/?p=307>. Last accessed 20/02/14.