

Developing a Research Topic & Question

Deciding on a Research Topic



Create a list of things that make you angry, sad, excited, or curious.



Do an internet search on a potential topic and examine what is out there.



Look at current trends in your field in professional newsletters, blogs, and newspapers.



Draw or outline a [concept map](#) to think through what you know and what questions you have.



Sample research topic:
Mental health and college students

What Is a Research Question?

One definition of a research question is:

“Perceived knowledge deficit within a subject area or field of study.” (Hulley et al., 2007)

Academic research papers may only have one research question. Large projects like dissertations may have multiple research questions.

Characteristics of a Strong Research Question

Clear

- Easily understood by the reader

Focused

- Can be addressed in the page length of the assignment

Concise

- Written in as few words as possible

Complex

- CAN'T be answered with just yes or no

Arguable

- Solutions are open for debate

Neutral

- Language is kept unbiased



Characteristics of **unsuccessful** research questions:

- Questions on brand new (<1 year old) trends and events
- Ethical questions about right/wrong or legal/illegal
- Questions that are impossible to answer
- Overly broad questions
- Questions that lack evidence
- Binary or yes/no or either/or questions
- Biased or leading questions



Bad question (ethical, broad, binary): Is it irresponsible not to vote in all elections you qualify for?



Better question: What factors influenced U.S. voters who abstained from participating in the 2020 presidential election?



Bad question (unanswerable, lacks evidence, biased): Why are cat people more introverted and dog people more extroverted?



Better question: How does the presence of household pets impact youth development?

From a Draft Question to a Final Question

Draft research question: What kinds of mental support are provided for college students?

When refining research questions, consider the following specifics:



After applying these concepts to the sample research question, it gets transformed into a more specific and answerable question.

Final research question: What administrative communication technique(s) are most impactful on informing first generation undergraduate students in the United States about online mental health support since COVID-19?

Breakdown of final research question:

- Geography – United States
- Time – Since COVID-19 (2020)
- Population – First generation undergraduate students
- Specific nouns – Online
- Disciplinary approach – Higher education

References

- How to write a research question. (2018, August 8). The Writing Center. <https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/research-basedwriting/how-to-write-a-research-question>.
- Hulley, S. B., Cummings, S. R., Browner, W. S., & Newman, T. B. (2006). Designing clinical research (3rd ed.). Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Kirker, M.J. (2020), The Research Question [PowerPoint slides], Honors College, George Mason University.

