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# How to Write a Research Question

## What is a research question?

A research question is the question around which you center your research. 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.

You should ask a question about an issue that you are genuinely curious and/or passionate about.

The question you ask should be developed for the discipline you are studying. A question appropriate for Biology, for instance, is different from an appropriate one in Political Science or Sociology. If you are developing your question for a course other than first-year composition, you may want to discuss your ideas for a research question with your professor.

## 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:

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1. *Choose an interesting general topic.* Most professional researchers focus on topics they are genuinely interested in studying. Writers should choose a broad topic about which they genuinely 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 periodicals 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 room for ambiguity 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 a book-length piece, let alone a standard college-level 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 stance 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 room 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 of thumb, if a quick Google search can answer a research question, it's likely not very effective.

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## Formulating Your Research Question (RQ)

In a **research paper**, the emphasis is on generating a unique question and then synthesizing diverse sources into a coherent essay that supports *your* argument about the topic. In other words, you integrate information from publications with *your* own thoughts in order to formulate an argument. Your topic is your starting place: from here, you will develop an engaging research question. Merely presenting a topic in the form of a question does not transform it into a good research question. For example:

### RESEARCH TOPIC

#### BROAD

“What forces affect race relations in America?”

Likewise, the question “What is the percentage of racial minorities holding management positions in corporate offices in Nashville?” is much too specific and would yield, at best, a statistic that could become part of a larger argument.

#### NEUTRAL

“How does KFC market its low-fat food offerings?”

### RESEARCH QUESTION

#### NARROWER

“How do corporate hiring practices affect race relations in Nashville?”

#### MAY YIELD an ARGUMENT or POSITION

“Does KFC put more money into marketing its high-fat food offerings than its lower-fat ones?”

The latter question is somewhat better, since it may lead you to take a stance or formulate an argument about consumer awareness or benefit.

#### OBJECTIVE (factual)

“How much time do youth between the ages of 10 and 15 spend playing video games?”

#### SUBJECTIVE (an issue about which you can take a side)

“What are the effects of video-gaming on the attention spans of youth between the ages of 10 and 15? →

The first question is likely to lead to some data, though not necessarily to an argument or issue. The second question is somewhat better, since it might lead you to formulate an argument for or against time spent playing video games.

#### OPEN-ENDED IDEA

“Does the author of this text use allusion?”

#### GIVES DIRECTION TO RESEARCH

“Does the ironic use of allusion in this text reveal anything about the author’s unwillingness to divulge his political commitments?”

The second question gives focus by putting the use of allusion into the specific context of a question about the author’s political commitments and perhaps also about the circumstances under which the text was produced.

### Research Question Checklist:

- Is my RQ something that I am curious about and that others might care about? Does it present an issue on which I can take a stand?
- Does my RQ put a new spin on an old issue, or does it try to solve a problem?
- Is my RQ too broad, too narrow, or OK?
- Is my RQ researchable...
  - o ...within the time frame of the assignment?
  - o ...given the resources available at my location?
- Is my RQ measurable? What type of information do I need? Can I find actual data to support or contradict a position?
- What sources will have the type of information that I need to answer my RQ (journals, books, internet resources, government documents, interviews with people)?

**The answer to a good research question will often be the THESIS of your research paper!** And the results of your research may not always be what you expected them to be. Not only is this ok, it can be an indication that you are doing careful work!

Adapted from an online tutorial at Empire State College: <http://www.esu.edu/html/pages/writerold/menus.htm#develop>