



# YPAR in School

## Defining the Research Question

Lesson adapted from:  
YPAR Hub. (n.d.). *Defining the Research Question*. <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/define-issue/defining-the-research-question/>

### Objective

To identify the issue of interest to be researched  
To write a research question

### Activity: Research Topics

#### Materials

- What Makes a Good Research Question? Handout (1 per participant)
- Identification of the Issue handout (1 per participant)
- Relevant data
- Paper
- Pens or Pencils
- Flip Chart Paper

#### Pre-Activity

Let the participants know that they are about to decide on the possible topics for research. There will be roughly 4-7 topics in the advisory group. Students must work collaboratively on this project. No individual projects. Group formation practices will vary. Use your discretion to help facilitate this process. It is important for all students to participate in this activity so they can have a say in the yearlong project. Start by walking the group through the “What Makes a Good Research Question?” handout.

Discuss that answerable questions only address one idea:

- They look at relationships and not causes and effects.
- They are clear and concise.
- They can be easily understood.
- They are manageable to answer in a couple of months.



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### Activity: Research Topics, cont.

#### **STEP 1: Deciding what the research topic will be**

Present one question to the group, and have participants write down three answers individually on a piece of paper. Your question can be very general, such as “What are some issues that are important to teens?” or it can be more tailored to what you’ve heard students talking about or community issues that you know are pressing right now, such as “What are some food access/health/water safety issues that are important to teens in Cleveland right now?” or “What are some educational issues that are important to CIHS students?”

- It is important to keep the question as open as possible so that students can come to an issue that is truly theirs to research, rather than us telling them what the problem is.
- This step is **crucial** to establishing youth ownership of the project and getting teens invested in the process of research. Note that you can use data or school or community assessments (e.g., Climate for Learning (CFL) survey) to help the group identify priority issues.

#### **STEP 2: Suggesting Research Topics**

Ask the participants to share one of the topics identified on their list. Go around the room, listing each topic, exactly as they are said, on a flip chart, whiteboard, or chalkboard. Once you have gotten a contribution from everyone in the room, ask people to share any other topics that have not yet been listed. Next take a few minutes to try to combine any topics together. Ask for suggestions from the group and sure that whoever thought of the initial suggestions agrees with the way it is being renamed or incorporated into a broader category, to ensure that no one’s thoughts or ideas are lost.



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### Activity: Research Topics, cont.

#### **STEP 3: Selecting the Research Topics**

Once you have a list of topics that everyone agrees on, split the group into groups of three. Have each group select the two topics it feels are the most important from the list. Have the team fill out the handout “Identification of the Issue” for each item they choose.

### Assessment

Have each team present the two topics chosen, explaining to the rest of the group why the team members think the issues they chose are the most important. Once a topic has been chosen, have any other team who chose it report on it as well, so that you can have a running record of each topic selected. Once all the groups have shared their selections, create a new listing of the topics chosen by teams in Step 3.

### Summarize

The final step is to negotiate and decide on topics for research. There may be choices that seem fairly obvious because a majority of people selected them. As the facilitator, you should try to get the group to think about things like how easy or difficult it will be to research certain topics or what kinds of data they could collect to address the topic. There also may be clear relationships between items on the list that the facilitator should point out in an effort to merge topics.



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### Summarize, cont.

It is recommended that each advisory group narrow the list down together even if it is difficult to get resolution or agreement within the group, because:

- It builds group identity.
- There are more people to work on different facets of the problem.
- It will be easier for the facilitator to manage
- It is easier to schedule and lead learning activities.
- It is much easier to identify enough key stakeholders with a handful of topics
- As far as teams: we have seen students choose their groups, we have seen students select into the topics they care about or want to learn about, and in other cases, advisors have played a part in group organization based on knowledge of students and students' interests
- If the group really can't come to agreement on 4-6 topics through discussion, voting can work. Ways to vote are:
  - Hands up for one versus the other topic
  - Written silent vote



Youth often find it more important to work with their peers than to compete over topics. A useful way to deal with disagreement in the group is to show how a topic members want to include may be an important part of the research model as an independent rather than a dependent variable. In other words, it can be a cause of the problem rather than the problem itself. This means that to change the problem, the cause itself has to be changed or improved.



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### Demonstrate

Once the group has come to a decision on the final research questions, congratulate everyone! Circle, highlight or in some way document the final topics. Thank everyone for their openness, honesty and willingness to work together. They have completed a very important step of their action research journey.



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## What Makes a Good Research Question?

Materials adapted from YPAR Hub:

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	<b>Example Question</b>	<b>Your Question</b>
What do you think the question is asking?	The question is trying to figure out what sorts of people, services, agencies teens see as resources when they're struggling with depression. Do they even feel they have the supports to begin with?	
Do you understand all of the words or phrases used?	What does the question mean by "support"? What about "emotional or mental health issues" – what exactly does that mean?	
Does the question only look at one issue, topic, or idea?	Yes, school supports for teens with emotional or mental health issues.	
Is the question about a specific group of people (age, gender, races, sexual orientation, etc.)?	Yes, this question is looking only at teens with social and emotional health issues – although, couldn't that be all teens?	
How important is this question to my community?	A lot of teens struggle with emotional issues and may experience depression, so it's important to know what's out there, and what's missing.	



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## Identification of the Issue

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Please select the two issues that your group thinks are the most important to teens and answer the following questions:

1

What is the issue?

2

Why is it an issue?

3

List the people affected by this issue.

4

Why do you think this issue is serious enough to research?

5

What could be some problems with doing this research?

6

What could be some problems with doing this research?