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Writing a (Good) Research Question



Objective

To identify the process for writing meaningful research questions

To evaluate students' research questions

Activity: What is a research question?

Overview

Developing a good research question is one of the first critical steps in the research process. The research question guides the research project and assists in the construction of a logical argument. The research question should be a clear, focused question that summarizes the issue that the researcher will investigate.

What is a research question?

A research question is a clear, focused, concise, complex, and arguable question around which you center your research. You should ask a question about an issue that you are genuinely curious and/or passionate about.

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.

Print out the following handouts to help students create their research question.



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Tips for how to Develop a Good Research Question

- Identify a broader subject of interest that lends itself to investigation. For example, “food deserts in Cleveland”.
- Do preliminary research on the general topic to find out what research has already been done and what literature already exists. What research has been done on the availability of fresh, local food in Cleveland? In similar urban areas? What types of studies? Is there a unique area that yet to be investigated or is there a particular question that may be worth replicating?
- Narrow the topic by asking open-ended "how" and "why" questions. For example, a researcher may want to consider the factors that are contributing to food deserts or the success rate of efforts to change this condition.
- Create a list of possible questions for consideration
- Look over the list and choose one that interests you and provides an opportunity for exploration.
- Finally, evaluate the question by using the following list of guidelines:
 - Is the research question one that is of interest to you and potentially to others?
 - Is it an issue or problem that needs to be improved or solved?
 - Is the research question researchable?
 - What resources will you need to address this question? Can you access them?
 - Will you be able to collect information to answer this question?
 - Is the research question too broad?
 - Is the research question too narrow?





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Examples of Research Questions

Take a look at the following examples of flawed research questions and well-designed questions

<p>Too narrow: What is the childhood obesity rate in Cleveland, OH?</p> <p><i>This is too narrow because it can be answered with a simple statistic. Questions that can be answered with a "yes" or a "no" should also typically be avoided.</i></p>	<p>Less narrow: How does the education level of a child's parents impact childhood obesity rates in Cleveland, OH?</p> <p><i>This question demonstrates the correct amount of specificity and the results would provide the opportunity for an argument to be formed.</i></p>
<p>Too broad: What are the effects of childhood obesity in the United States?</p> <p><i>This question is so broad that it would be nearly impossible to collect data to answer the question and too broad to be discussed in a typical research paper.</i></p>	<p>More focused: How does childhood obesity correlate with academic performance in elementary school children?</p> <p><i>This question has a very clear focus for which data can be collected, analyzed, and discussed.</i></p>
<p>Too objective: How much time do young children spend doing physical activity per day?</p> <p><i>This question may allow you to collect data but does not lend itself to collecting data that can be used to create a valid argument because the data is just factual information.</i></p>	<p>More Subjective: What is the relationship between physical activity levels and childhood obesity?</p> <p><i>This is a more subjective question that may lead to the formation of an argument based on the results and analysis of the data.</i></p>
<p>Too simple: How are school systems addressing childhood obesity?</p> <p><i>This information can be obtained without the need to collect <u>unique</u> data. The question could be answered with a simple online search and does not provide an opportunity for analysis.</i></p>	<p>More Complex: What are the effects of intervention programs in high schools on the rate of adolescent obesity among 9-12th grade students?</p> <p><i>This question is more complex and requires both investigation and evaluation which will lead the research to form an argument that may be discussed.</i></p>



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Steps to Developing a Research Question

- 1. Choose an interesting general topic.** Even directed academic research should focus on a topic in which the writer is at least somewhat personally invested. Writers should choose a broad topic about which they genuinely would like to know more.
- 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 questions does this early research raise?
- 3. Consider your audience.** Always keep your audience in mind when narrowing your topic and developing your question. Would that particular audience be interested in this question?
- 4. Start asking questions.** Taking into consideration all of the above, start asking yourself open-ended “how” and “why” questions about your general topic. How did this happen? Why are things this way?
- 5. Evaluate your question.** After you've got a question or even a couple of questions down on paper, evaluate these questions to realize if they would be effective research questions or if they need more revising.
 - 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.
 - 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.
- 6. Hypothesize.** After you've come up with a question, think about what the path you think the answer will take. Where do you think your research will take you? What kind of argument are you hoping to make/support? What will it mean if your research disputes your planned argument? At this step, you are well on your way to having a focus for your research, constructing a thesis, and then writing out your argument in a paper.