

# Developing a Research Question: For Graduate Students

## Introduction to Research Questions

What is a Research Question? It's a question you answer by doing research. Most people start with a topic, then develop a question about that topic.

Research questions are the foundation of academic research. That's because academic research is a process of inquiry. All serious academic research starts with a question about something, then information is gathered and analyzed to come up with an answer to the question.

Your research question also acts as an organizing tool. Your question focuses and defines your research, influencing the direction of your entire project. It helps keep you on track and avoid tangents.

Research Question Example:

- **Topic:** Public infrastructure and security
- **Question:** What strategies help prevent cybersecurity attacks on electric power plants?  
You can ask many different questions about each topic. Choosing one helps you focus on one aspect of the topic and choose a particular angle to approach it from.

## Creating Research Questions

You create a research question in the planning phase of your research.

Coming up with a question is one of the hardest parts of the research process. You need to read a lot of existing scholarship and do a lot of hard thinking, right at the beginning. A good research question takes time and effort.

There is no magic that makes creating a question easy. You need to understand your topic area. What questions interest you? What have others not explored, or how might you explore something in a different way?

Do some brainstorming and think of different questions you could ask about your topic. For personal debt in Canada, we could ask why people have debt, its impact on mental health, or how to best educate people to budget.

The question you choose focuses your research and determines which direction it will take. At the beginning, pick a few questions to explore.

Research questions look a little different in different disciplines. However, they often involve causation or relationships. For example:

- Why do youth become homeless?
- How do gender and location impact online health activity?

A good question is interesting to you and acceptable to your thesis committee. It is manageable in scope and researchable. It contributes something new, and isn't just repeating what others have already done.

Researchers often have more than one research question for a project. Remember: the goal of a research question is to help you focus. Make sure you have only **one main question**. Any other questions should be secondary, and help you answer the main question rather than lead you in different directions.

## Finding Examples of Questions

It's helpful to see other peoples' questions when developing yours. Since the research question is a working tool to guide your research process, though, often it's not obvious in the finished result. Here are some strategies for finding examples of research questions related to your topic.

Other students in your program have created research questions for their dissertations, theses or MRPs. Your program or department office can direct you to these. You can also find examples of theses online, [both from Laurier and other universities](#).

Most research for MA theses and MRPs are similar in scope to a scholarly article, so it's useful to look at articles in your topic area. You can often deduce what the research question was based on the key aim or goal of the study, as summarized in the abstract. For example:

- **Article:** Charoensukmongkol, P. (2018). Impact of social media on social comparison and envy in teenagers. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(1), 69-79.
- **Abstract:** Given the concern about the negative consequences of social media use by teenagers, this research aims to explore the relationship between social media use intensity and the tendency of teenagers to engage in social comparison and envy.
- **Likely Research Question:** What is the relationship between the frequency of teens' social media use and their tendency to engage in social comparison?

## Making Your Question Workable

Once you have a few questions, evaluate them to see how workable they are. You want to choose a question that you can research in the time and with the resources you have. There are a few factors to consider.

Most people start off far too broad in their scope, and need to narrow their focus to be more workable. Look at similar projects in your department to see what their scope is. Make sure you define your terms as specifically as you can. For example:

- **Question:** How are media representations of poverty today different than in the 1970s?
- **Focusing strategies:** Define time frame and terms like media, poverty. Be specific and concrete. For example: choose specific years to compare (1974 and 2024), choose one media source (Globe and Mail), choose one manifestation of poverty (homelessness), choose a type of representation (photos).
- **More workable question:** How do visual representations of homelessness in Globe and Mail articles differ in 1974 and 2024?

Focusing is hard. People often want to work on bigger projects than are feasible. Think of your big project as a research agenda, or something you can do many pieces of focused research on. Each research project is like a small puzzle piece of your larger research agenda.

Here is an example of a well-focused research study:

- **Article:** Ahmed, W. et al. (2020). COVID-19 and the “Film Your Hospital” conspiracy theory. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22 (10).
- **Abstract**
  - **Background:** Accepting conspiracy theories increases the likelihood that an individual may ignore government advice about public health interventions. It is important to understand the drivers of misinformation on social media and strategies to mitigate it.
  - **Objectives:** To understand the drivers behind the #FilmYourHospital conspiracy theory on Twitter, and specifically to determine which sources of information were used as evidence to support the theory.
  - **Data & Methods:** Twitter data related to the #FilmYourHospital hashtag across a 7-day period from April 13-20, 2020 were analyzed using social network analysis.

In this example the researchers start with their larger research agenda as context: the spread of misinformation through social media. Then they get progressively more specific. They focus on one example, the Film Your Hospital conspiracy theory. They further define their scope as Twitter and a 7 day time frame.

Having the right scope and focus is the first and most important factor in making your research project workable. Make sure you get feedback and think about how workable your question is before choosing it.

Each research question involves a different research project. For each, think about what data or information you need, how you will collect and analyze it, and how much time that will take. In our example, we need access to Globe and Mail photos in articles from 1974 and 2024. We need to download and organize them, code and analyze their content.

If you have a concrete, focused question with the right scope for the type of project you are working on, and can gather and analyze the data you need in the time frame you have, your question is workable. If you need to choose between questions, choose the one that is the most workable and easiest to research.

## Situating Your Question in Theory

You need to make sure your research question is situated in theory. Theory forms the context for your research, and the lens you view your topic through. It affects the questions you ask, and determines your research direction.

Theory means different things in different disciplines. It could mean:

- a social or cultural theorist, like Foucault or Judith Butler.
- an approach or a mode of thought, like critical disability studies.
- a research context, or stream of existing research.

Some people know what theory or research context they are using right away. Other people have a topic but don't know which theory or context they want to use. It's helpful to take a look at some of the options to see what the impact on your research project would be.

Here's an example of how theory affects research questions at a very broad level.

**Topic: social media and conspiracy theories**

Context or theory	political science	psychology	communication studies
Possible question	How does political affiliation affect belief in conspiracy theories?	How does belief in conspiracy theories correlate with mental well-being?	Do different social media platforms have different rates of conspiracy theory?

As you can see, the theory or context you choose affects the questions you ask. To make an informed choice, look at your theory options. What questions arise from each option? What would the research project involve? [Here is a worksheet to help you evaluate.](#)

## Revising Your Question

You decide on a research question before you start. As you begin your research, you are likely to learn something that requires you to change your question.

Research is not a linear process, so this is normal and expected.

## Summary

A good research question requires hard work at the beginning of your research.

The more effort you put into creating a workable, focused research question, the less change you'll need to make to your research as you go.

A good research question will help streamline and make your research project more efficient.