

Developing a Research Question: for Graduate Students

In this video, we'll look at what research questions are from the perspective of a graduate student. We'll look at what research questions are, why they're used, how to create, focus, and evaluate one to be sure it's good.

Research Questions & Why We Use Them

First, let's talk about what research questions are and why they're used.

Academic research is a process of inquiry, or of asking and answering questions. Research questions form the foundation of the process. Basically, you decide on a question you want to research, then focus and test the question. After you're happy with it, you gather the information you need to answer the question. After you have this information, you analyze it to come up with an answer.

A research question also helps with one of the most common problems in the research process: staying on track. Your question helps by defining and focusing your project to keep you on course and avoid tangents.

Most people first start with an idea about a topic, and then develop a research question on that topic. For example, if our topic is online bullying, one question could be which students are most targeted by online bullying in Ontario high schools.

You can ask many questions about any topic. For example, if we are interested in online bullying in schools, we could also ask why it happens or how we can best prevent it. Picking one of these questions defines the focus of your research and the angle you are going to take.

Situating Your Question in Context

When thinking of a question, you need to consider what context your research is situated in. Sometimes this is called situating your research in theory. What's considered a theory varies by discipline. It could mean a specific social or cultural theorist, like Michel Foucault, or a school of thought, like feminist standpoint theory. Or, it could refer to research context, or what the existing research on the topic is in your field and what approach or viewpoint it takes. For example, we could look at personal debt in Canada from the perspective of criminology, and ask whether having a high level of personal debt makes someone more likely to commit crime. Or, from an education perspective, we might ask what methods work best for teaching people how to stay out of debt.

As you can see, the questions we ask are determined by the lens or context we approach it from. In turn, the question you ask has an impact on all the aspects of your project, including your method and the information you need to collect and analyze. For our question on crime and debt, the methods and data would be very different than for our question on teaching people to stay out of debt. The research question you choose has implications for your whole project.

So when should you use a research question as a graduate student? The answer is pretty much always. You'll be required to have a research question for a large research project like a thesis, but it's also useful for papers you

write as course assignments. Undergraduate-level research often doesn't involve research questions, but at the graduate level it should be standard practice.

How to Create and Focus a Research Question

Next let's look at how to create a research question.

Coming up with a research question is hard work, since it requires you to plan your project in advance. First you'll need to know enough about your topic to come up with a good question. If you think of the existing research as a series of dots, you need to know where to put the dot for your research and how all the dots are connected. To do this requires searching for existing research, reading, identifying key themes and arguments and analyzing these.

Then, you can start to think about possible questions. The best approach here is to brainstorm and come up with several of them, then evaluate each before choosing one.

It's important to determine how workable your question is. What information do you need to answer your question, for example, and how will you get it? Is the information even available, and if so how easy is it for you to get? What skills and resources are involved in compiling and analyzing the data? How long will the project take? Can you do the research with the time and resources you have?

Scope is a key factor in determining how workable your question is. Obviously more complex projects or projects larger in scope take more time and work than simpler, smaller scale projects. The right scope is one that fits the size of your project--a 20 page paper requires a much smaller, more focused question than an 80 page thesis. Most people start too big and need to focus so their research is the right scope for the type of project they have.

Focusing involves being very specific about all the details involved in your question. You need to be sure all the vague and general terms you use are made more specific. This involves specifying what all your terms mean, or operationally defining them. For example, to focus a question about social media behavior and how it varies by gender, we would look at the terms we've used and try to be more specific about each. Social media could mean a variety of things, but let's define it as Twitter. Behavior is also quite a general term, but let's define it as retweeting of Twitter posts. That would give us a question on how retweeting in Twitter varies by gender, which is a little clearer and more focused.

Focusing also involves specifying what context or example you are studying. In our Twitter example, it would be really hard to study all the retweets ever done. Instead, let's look at retweets of posts made by a specific candidate during the most recent Ontario election. This gives a more specific focus to the project, and makes it more workable.

Another aspect of focusing is to be sure you have one main question. Often researchers work with multiple research questions for larger projects. These questions shouldn't all lead you in different directions, though. Make sure you have one main question, and that other questions are sub-questions that contribute to and help you clarify and answer the main question.

After you have a good question, you can start doing research to answer it. However, research isn't a linear process. As you progress you'll likely change your thinking somewhat and modify your question a little, which is completely normal and expected. Spending the time to plan in advance and create a good question will help

keep those changes to a minimum, and keep you on track. It also helps streamline your writing, since the answer to your question will be your thesis and form the basis of your main arguments. A good question is the foundation of good academic research, and helps you manage the kinds of larger and more complex writing projects you'll need to do as a graduate student.

Questions & Feedback

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.

Help us improve: give us feedback on this video at library.wlu.ca/videofeedback.