

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

OVERVIEW

In this video we'll be looking at research questions. We'll look at what a research question is, why you'd want to have one, how to create one and check to be sure it's good, and what you do with it once you have one.

WHAT'S A RESEARCH QUESTION?

First, what's a research question?

A research question is an actual question you ask yourself about your topic. It's some aspect of the topic that you are interested in and want to find out more about. All good academic research starts with a research question.

The research question doesn't usually show up in the final paper, but we can see evidence that there was one. In this article, the authors state the goal of their article: to assess the factors that make people willing to pirate digital music. They don't tell us what their research question was, but based on their goal we can assume they had one, and it was something like Why do consumers pirate digital music?

You'll almost never be asked specifically to create a research question as part of a research paper, but you should always start with one anyway.

WHY DO YOU NEED ONE?

Now that you know what a research question is, why do you need one?

Most students find a topic, then start working on their research paper. Let's assume your topic is the number of women in politics. A topic is a starting point for a research question.

You ask a research question about a topic. On our topic, we could ask the research question: Why do some countries have more women politicians than others? There are lots of possible questions you could ask about any topic. For example, we could also ask: Does having more women politicians lead to better laws for women?

Picking a question helps you focus and gives you an angle to approach your topic. This helps you streamline your research and writing, which will save you a lot of time and make your papers better.

HOW DO YOU CREATE A RESEARCH QUESTION?

Next we'll look at how to create a research question.

We'll follow some steps. First, pick a topic you're interested in. Then, find one aspect of the topic you want to focus on. Think of some questions you could ask about that aspect of the topic. Pick one, then focus it to be sure it's a good question. We'll go through these steps using our example.

First, pick a topic you're interested in, like women in politics. Next, think of different aspects of the topic you could focus on.

Here I've mapped out some of the different aspects of the topic women in politics. One might be women voters, how they vote and whether they vote for women politicians. Another might be women politicians, differences from male politicians, how many they are, and what affects that.

Once you've thought about what aspects of the topic there are, pick one to focus on. Let's pick numbers of women politicians, and what affects that.

Now try to think of some questions you could ask about the aspect of your topic that you've chosen. On our topic, we could ask things like: Why do some countries have more women politicians than others? Or: What kinds of barriers hinder women who are entering politics?

Once you've thought of some questions, pick one to work with. Let's pick: Why do some countries have more women politicians than others?

Finally, look at your question to be sure it's specific and clear. Make sure your question is clear about who, what, where, and when you are talking about.

Let's see how we can make our question more specific. We don't want to know about women politicians at all levels of government, so we'll specify the national level only. "Some countries" is also quite vague. We should focus on some specific countries to compare, like Canada and Sweden. In this case, our more specific question would be Why does Sweden have more women politicians at the national level than Canada?

HOW DO I KNOW IT'S A GOOD QUESTION?

Now you know how to create a research question. But how do you know if it's a good question?

A good question focuses on only one issue and doesn't try to fit in too much.

It requires analysis and thinking, and doesn't have an obvious answer. How and why questions are best for this.

It's specific and focused, and can be answered in the space you have to write about it. The shorter your paper, the more specific your question needs to be.

A good question is also clear, with all the vague words, like 'some countries', defined or made more specific.

Let's look at this question: How does the media represent Islam? It's focused on one issue, which is good, and requires some analysis. But it's not a good question, because it's not specific enough. It should be clearer who, what, where, and when it is talking about. For example, media could be newspapers, tv, music videos, advertising, etc. It could be media in Canada, South America, or India. Islam could mean the religion, some aspect of the religion, or people who are Muslim. A better question would be: How have newspapers in the U.S. represented Muslim women since 9/11?

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION?

You don't usually put your question into your final paper. So what do you do with it?

Basically, you do research to find the answer to your question.

Having a research question helps you focus your research, since you are looking for information that helps you answer your question.

For our question on why Sweden has more women politicians than Canada, we might need some statistics to tell us whether that's actually true. We would also need to know the reasons Sweden has a lot of women politicians. Then, we would need to know what's different in Canada. Knowing what information we need to answer our question helps make the research more efficient. We know what kinds of sources we need and what we're looking for in those sources.

Your research question also helps you create your thesis. Your thesis is the answer to your question, summarized in one sentence. For example, our thesis might be: Sweden's electoral system encourages the participation of women in politics better than Canada's. The rest of your paper would support the thesis with more detailed arguments. Your whole paper will focus on answering your research question, which helps give structure and focus to your paper.

TRY IT

Try it yourself! Use the Research Question worksheet on this web page to create your own research question.

QUESTIONS & FEEDBACK

If you have any questions about how to create a research question, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus. If you're not a Laurier student, please contact your local library for help instead.