

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Developing a Research Question

It is absolutely essential to develop a research question that you're interested in or care about in order to focus your research and your paper (unless, of course, your instructor gives you a very specific assignment). For example, researching a broad topic such as "business management" is difficult since there may be hundreds of sources on all aspects of business management. On the other hand, a focused question such as "What are the pros and cons of Japanese management style?" is easier to research and can be covered more fully and in more depth.

How do you develop a usable research question? Choose an appropriate topic or issues for your research, one that actually can be researched (see exercise 1). Then list all of the questions that you'd like answered yourself. Choose the best question, one that is neither too broad nor too narrow (see exercise 2). Sometimes the number of sources you find will help you discover whether your research question is too broad, too narrow, or just right.

If you know a lot about the topic, you can develop a research question based on your own knowledge. If you feel you don't know much about the topic, think again. For example, if you're assigned a research topic on an issue confronting the ancient Babylonian family, remember, by virtue of your own family life, you already know a great deal about family issues. Once you determine what you do know, then you're ready to do some general reading in a textbook or encyclopedia in order to develop a usable research question.

It's a good idea to evaluate your research question before completing the research exercise (see exercise 3). A CGCC writing tutor would be happy to provide feedback on your research question. You should also check your research question with your course instructor.

Topic/Issue

A topic is what the essay or research paper is about. It provides a focus for the writing. Of course, the major topic can be broken down into its components or smaller pieces (e.g., the major topic of nuclear waste disposal may be broken down into medical, economic, and environmental concerns). But the important thing to remember is that you should stick with just one major topic per essay or research paper in order to have a coherent piece of writing.

An issue is a concept upon which you can take a stand. While "nuclear waste" is a topic, "safe and economic disposal of nuclear waste" is an issue, or a "point of discussion, debate, or dispute" (American Heritage Dictionary).

Choose a Question that is Not Too Broad or Narrow

For example, if you choose juvenile delinquency (a topic that can be researched), you might ask the following questions:

- a. What is the 1994 rate of juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?
- b. What can we do to reduce juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?
- c. Does education play a role in reducing juvenile delinquents' return to crime?

Once you complete your list, review your questions in order to choose a usable one that is neither too broad nor too narrow. In this case, the best research question is "c." Question "a" is too narrow, since it can be answered with a simple statistic. Question "b" is too broad; it implies that the researcher will cover many tactics for reducing juvenile delinquency that could be used throughout the country. Question "c," on the other hand, is focused enough to research in some depth.

Exercise 1: Is the Topic Researchable?

Pretend you are writing a research paper right now, at the beginning of the 21st century. Let's look at the following questions and decide whether they can or cannot be easily researched.

Question A: Do the economies that result from a trash burning plant outweigh or not outweigh its environmental impact?

Question "a" is researchable. You'd have to sift through a lot of information, both pro and con, valid and invalid, in order to choose the best information to answer the research question and support your own point of view, but the point is that there is at least enough information to sift through.

Question B: Is sexual preference a result of nature (physically based) or nurture (socially-culturally based)?

Question "b" is somewhat researchable. There have been some recent experiments dealing with the physical (genetic) basis of sexual preference, but not enough research to support a credible view one way or the other.

Question C: Does McDonald's or Burger King make a better burger?

Question "c" is not researchable as it is worded, since it has no concrete meaning. What does "better" mean? Better in terms of nutrition? Better tasting? Better value? Fewer calories? Better for making your kids happy? This question could become researchable only if you define its terms.

Question D: Is Prozac a good way to treat clinical depression in certain cases?

Question "d" is researchable. As with question "a," you'd have to sift through a lot of information, both pro and con, valid and invalid, in order to choose the best information to answer the research question and support your own point of view, but the point is that there is at least enough information to sift through.

Question E: Is there a link between hours of television viewing and violent behavior in children aged 8-14?

Question "e" is researchable. Again, you'd have to sift through a lot of information, both pro and con, valid and invalid, in order to choose the best information to answer the research question and support your own point of view, but the point is that there is at least enough information to sift through.

Exercise 2: Is the Question Too Broad or Too Narrow?

Consider the following five sets of research questions and decide which one is the best research question (neither too broad nor too narrow) in each set.

A: What marketing strategies does the Coca-Cola company currently apply?

B: What is the Coca-Cola company's future marketing plan?

C: What marketing strategies has the Coca-Cola company used in the past?

Question "a" is the best research question. Your research to answer this question may include observation of print, television, and radio advertisements as well as research into various current marketing theories and strategies. Both types of research are "do-able," and the question is focused enough to yield a fully-developed research paper.

Question "b" is very broad and is not researchable--it's unlikely that Coca-Cola personnel will reveal their marketing plan.

Question "c" may be too broad as well, since "the past" covers a lot of time, especially since the Coca-Cola company was incorporated in 1919.

A: What impact has deregulation had on the airline industry?

B: What percentage of commercial airline crashes were traced to negligent maintenance during the 10 years immediately preceding and following deregulation?

C: What impact has deregulation had on commercial airline safety?

Question "a" is too broad, once you get into the research, since deregulation may have had impact on safety, costs, passenger fees, ability to comply with government regulations, and many other areas of the airline industry, too many to deal with in depth in one research paper.

Question "b" is too narrow. It can be answered with simple percentages and cannot be developed into a full research paper.

Question "c" is the best research question. You may use statistics such as question "b" would uncover as you answer question "c," which is focused enough to allow you to research the question in some depth yet broad enough to allow you to consider the various effects of deregulation on airline safety.

A: Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more developed skills?

B: Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more highly developed language skills?

C: Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with larger vocabularies?

Question "a" is too broad since it focuses on **all** skills (e.g., language, social, small motor skills, large motor skills, etc.--you get the idea). You'd have to gather too much diverse information to answer question "a," and it's quite possible that the answer would be complicated if you discovered that not all skills were developed to the same degree.

The best research question is "b," "Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more highly developed language skills?" The topic is broad enough to find more than just one or two sources, but it's limited to one focus--the development of preschool language skills.

There may or may not be enough information to answer question "c." You'd need to find more than just one or two studies if you chose to answer question "c." If you find that there are enough sources dealing with vocabulary only, then you could choose to pursue question "c."

A: What are the 14 different disease-causing genes that were discovered in 1994?

B: What is the importance of genetic research in our lives?

C: How might the discovery of a genetic basis for obesity change the way in which we treat obese persons, both medically and socially?

Question "a" is far too narrow to develop into a research paper. You could answer this question in one sentence, and the question does not allow you to develop your own thoughts or opinions about the topic.

Question "b" is too broad. You could write a book to discuss the importance of genetic research in our lives.

Question "c" is the best choice. You might be asking, "How can I research something of which the effect hasn't yet been felt?" You can logically posit what "might happen" in the future based on what "has happened" in the past. For example, your research may bring you to the major things thought to have caused obesity in the recent past (last 2-3 decades) in order to establish a direct relationship between cause and treatment. Once you establish that direct cause-and-effect relationship, you can project similar types of relationships based on the new genetic research.

A: How can adult children of alcoholics most positively interact with their alcoholic parents?

B: How do adult children of alcoholics interact with their alcoholic parents?

C: What is the major emotional reaction of adult children of alcoholics to their alcoholic parents?

Question "a" is the best choice. It narrows the scope by focusing on only the most positive ways of interaction. It also asks you to use the research to support your own informed judgment, which you provide eventually in the final research paper, thus creating interest as well as focus.

At first glance, there's not a lot of difference between questions "a" and "b." But there is one major difference. Question "b" asks for the variety of ways in which adult children of alcoholics interact with their alcoholic parents. Substantial research has identified many patterns of interaction, so this question may be too broad to deal with in the scope of one research paper.

Question "c" may be too narrow--it asks the researcher to identify just one major emotional reaction, and as worded, it does not leave the topic open for further exploration to questions like "why?".

Exercise 3: Evaluate Your Own Research Question

Ask the following eight questions to evaluate the quality of your research question and the ease with which you should be able to answer it:

1. Does the question deal with a topic or issue that interests me enough to spark my own thoughts and opinions?
2. Is the question easily and fully researchable?
3. What type of information do I need to answer the research question?
E.g., The research question about what impact deregulation has had on commercial airline safety will obviously require certain types of information:
 - statistics on airline crashes before and after
 - statistics on other safety problems before and after
 - information about maintenance practices before and after
 - information about government safety requirements before and after
4. Is the scope of this information reasonable (e.g., can I really research 30 online writing programs developed over a span of 10 years?)
5. Given the type and scope of the information that I need, is my question too broad, too narrow, or okay?
6. What sources will have the type of information that I need to answer the research question (journals, books, Internet resources, government documents, people, etc.)?
7. Can I access these sources?
8. Given my answers to the above questions, do I have a good quality research question that I actually will be able to answer by doing research?

Evaluation Tip: Always contact your instructor if you're not sure whether your research question fulfills the assignment.

Finally, remember that, while a research question is important and a great way to start an essay assignment, it may not go in the paper itself; however, the specific answer you discover to your research question could be the basis for your thesis statement!