



Research Questions

What is a Research Question?

It is a clear statement in the form of a question of the specific issue that a researcher wishes to answer in order to address a research problem. A research problem is an issue that lends itself to systematic investigation through research.

After exploring and gathering background information on a subject area, it is important to focus on a specific topic to research.

When you focus in on a research topic from a broad subject area, it is important to select a topic which is:

- 1) interesting to you, and
- 2) not too broad and not too specific.

If you select a topic that is too general, you will be overwhelmed with too much information to choose from and it will be difficult to focus your search. If there are whole books written about your topic, it is too broad for a research paper.

If you choose a topic that is too specific, it will be difficult to find enough information to support your ideas and there may not be enough sources to allow you to develop a balanced perspective on a topic. If your research question can be fully answered in a few paragraphs, your topic is too limited. Narrowing in on a precise topic often continues well into the research process. As you gather more information, you will come up with more ideas in order to focus your research.

Paying attention to the wording of your research question can sometimes help you avoid being too specific. Research questions beginning with "How..." or "Why..." are usually broader and typically lead to more substantial research projects than questions beginning with "Who...," "Where...," or "When..." which can often be too limited for most research assignments. Questions beginning with "What..." tend to vary in breadth, depending on the wording of the rest of the question. For example, the question, "What is the effect of illegal immigration on the U.S. economy?" is a relatively broad question, while "What percentage of total U.S. employees are illegal immigrants?" is a much more specific question and would not be broad enough for most research assignments.

Research questions that have no simple answers usually lead to more productive research papers. Topics that are controversial and for which there are various different points of view give you more possibilities for developing your own ideas and analysis from your research.

Examples of Research Questions:

- What is the effect of illegal immigration on the U.S. economy?
- What are the ethical questions surrounding cloning? or What is controversial about cloning?
- What author made important contributions during the Harlem Renaissance movement?

Developing a Research Question

When researching, it is essential to develop a research question that the writer is interested in or cares about. For example, researching a broad topic like World War II would be difficult because there would be hundreds of resources available and the writer would get lost in all the new information. However, a more focused question like, “What effect did the bombing of Pearl Harbor have on the United States?” is easier to research and is a more focused question. Eventually, your claim statement will answer this question.

Choose a question that is neither too broad nor too narrow

For example, if you choose abortion as your topic, you might want to ask yourself some questions before you begin the research process.

- Why has the number of abortions increased in the past ten years?
- What programs are being implemented to help educate younger girls and boys about practicing safe sex?
- What role does religion have in determining a woman’s choice to have an abortion?

Which of the above statements would be the best to research and why?

Remember you want your research question to generate some discussions, not answer a yes/no question. Remember the following things when developing your research question:

- Does the question deal with a topic or issue that interests me enough to spark my own thoughts and opinions?
- Is the question easily and fully researchable?
- What type of information do I need to answer the research question?
- Is the scope of the information reasonable?
- Given the type and scope of the information that I need, is my question too broad or too narrow?
- What sources will have the type of information that I need to answer the research question?

