

What is a research question?

A research question is a **clear, focused** and **complex** question around which you center your research. You should ask a question about something you are really curious about. Research questions provide a path through the research process.

Steps to developing a research question:

- **Choose an interesting general topic.** Choose a broad topic about which you would like to know more. An example of a general topic might be “Slavery in the American South” or “Global Warming” or “Health Care in America” or “Politics in the Middle East” or “Poverty.”
- **Do some preliminary research on your general topic.** Do a few quick Web searches on your topic to help you narrow your focus. What questions does this early research raise?
- **Start asking questions.** Start asking yourself open-ended “how” and “why” questions about your general topic. For example, “What were some of the experiences of children who were slaves in the American South?” or “What policies should the US government adopt to alleviate poverty?”

- **Evaluate your research question:**

- 1) *Is it clear?* A strong research question should never leave room for ambiguity or interpretation.

Example:

Unclear: *Why are social networking sites harmful?*

Clear: *How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on Facebook?*

The unclear version of this question assumes that this “harm” is proven and/or accepted. The clearer version specifies a site (Facebook) and the type of harm (privacy issues).

- 2) *Is it focused?* When in doubt, make a research question as narrow and focused as possible.

Example:

Unfocused: *What is the effect on the environment from global warming?*

Focused: *How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?*

The unfocused research question is so broad that it can’t be answered in a book. The focused version narrows down to a specific cause (glacial melting), a specific place (Antarctica), and a specific group that is affected (penguins).

- 3) *Is it complex?* As a general rule, if a quick Google search can answer a research question, it’s likely not very effective.

Example:

Too simple: *What is the current rate of childhood obesity?*

Appropriately Complex: *What is the relationship between video gaming and childhood obesity?*

The simple version of this question can be looked up online and answered in a few factual sentences; it leaves no room for analysis. The more complex version is thought provoking and requires both significant investigation and evaluation from the writer.