

Your Research Question Can Guide You (if you let it)

[The main source text for this series is Kate Turabian's excellent and authoritative text, "A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations" (8th edition).]

Why you definitely need a strong research question

If you're an experienced researcher, you understand that a number of your readers, perhaps quite a few of them, will read your study and disagree with your argument. You accept this as an unpreventable side effect of sharing research on important issues. What experienced researchers cannot assent to, however, is when someone has no opinion whatsoever on your research because **they don't care**. This particular problem can be traced back to the source of your research: Your research question.

Your research question can help guide you through your entire research process and ensure that you remain on track whenever you risk veering off. After all, starting your research without any preparations and planning is a recipe for disaster. A research question is the first step in your planning stage, but you should also ensure that throughout your research, you continue to refer to your research question and your plan with every step. After all, your best research will always start with an "effective" question, one you feel compelled to answer.

Three types of research questions

Obviously, not all questions are created equally. A strong research question can result in an excellent study, whereas a poorly posed research question can have disastrous consequences in your research. It helps to think of your research question as a compass.

According to Kate Turabian, the following sequence helps researchers formulate their research question:

1. I am working on a topic X (e.g., U.S. propaganda on North Korea)
2. Because I want to find out Y (the extent of how U.S. propaganda affects U.S. policy toward North Korea itself)
3. So that I can help others understand Z (how your own propaganda could

potentially negatively affect your own policies, and in turn, lead to globally grave consequences)

Three types of research questions can be posed: (a) *conceptual*; (b) *practical*; and (c) *applied research*. Most questions presented in studies are *conceptual*, whereas those that are most commonly asked in the private sector are *practical*. Lastly, an *applied research* question is somewhere in-between.

Conceptual questions. A *conceptual* question provides a response that may or may not inform readers which actions to take, but definitely enhances their understanding on a particular issue. It goes without saying that before we can attempt to resolve any important practical issue, we must first perform conceptual research in order to grasp the problem at hand. In academia, however, most researchers chiefly aim to improve our understanding.

Practical questions. A *practical* question informs readers on what actions to take in order to resolve—or at minimum, improve—problematic situations. Therefore, returning to Turabian's sequence, for *practical* questions, it would read something like this:

1. I am working on a topic X (North (e.g., U.S. propaganda on North Korea))
2. Because I want to find out Y (the extent of how U.S. propaganda affects U.S. policy toward North Korea itself)
3. So that I can inform others which actions to take to resolve/improve the situation Z (e.g., how to narrow propaganda targeting and conduct effective segmentation to prevent your own propaganda from having any potential influence on your own policies)

As is evident, answering most *practical* questions will yield obvious benefits. In academic fields (e.g., health care and engineering), researchers occasionally ask *practical* questions, but a more common type of question posed is somewhere between the practical and conceptual types: the *applied research* question.

Applied research questions. Which actions to take in addressing a practical problem are determined through research, a necessary prerequisite toward understanding the

problem prior to tackling it. The answer to the *applied research* question is not the solution to such a problem, but presents only a step toward the solution.

Applied research questions are commonplace in academic fields (e.g., APA, AMA, and IEEE) as well as in companies and governmental agencies that conduct research to better understand an issue before addressing it.

Most of academia regards its mission as not resolving problems directly, but as enhancing their understanding of these problems (which may or may not aid in resolving them).

Now that we've covered the three types of research questions, let's briefly discuss how effective and experienced researchers employ them as their guide.

What to do with your research question

Because researchers want to share more than mere facts, they don't seek out just any data on their topic; they search for specific data they can utilize as evidence to test against hypotheses related to their research question.

Effective and experienced researchers, however, don't stop there. They understand that the work doesn't have to stop once they believe they've convinced us sufficiently that their conclusion is sound; they will feel compelled to show their readers why their question warranted asking in the first place, and informs us on how the conclusion they've reached can enhance our understanding of a more generalizable issue, perhaps even presenting it from a novel perspective (always based on the conclusion, of course, which could not have been as effective with a poorly posed research question).

By contrast, "green" researchers occasionally don't understand why they should even have to bother with a research question, considering they're now armed with their topic, and they'll refer only to that to plan their work, which usually and expectedly results in a general direction (i.e., lacks specificity and direction). Now, who but the most non-inquisitive types of readers would this type of study appeal to?

To wit: Effective researchers generally avoid the high stakes of approaching a study with only a topic, but no research question, because they understand that only when they are armed with a research question can they know what to look for, what to retain, and—just as important—what to discard.

Don't want to stop there? Then don't just tell your readers your conclusion with an attached explanation as to why it's sound; help them understand why the question

warranted posing in the first place. In other words, don't limit yourself; dare to think bigger.

Summarizing the research question

Naturally, writing a research paper, let alone an entire thesis, can be a daunting task, but if you segment any project into parts, you can obtain a holistic view of the components that will comprise your study, and you can piece together all the parts that make up the whole. Use your research question to help you navigate these parts in order to ensure success for your research.

Forming good research habits

Write daily. Don't just take notes on your sources, but clarify your thoughts on them. Don't shy away from personal opinions. Jot down your own emerging ideas as well, which can help you better organize them inside your head and form connections between them.