Designing a Good Research Question

## *Keep a record of every step of this process, including reasons.*

# Narrow down from a broad topic to a focus:

* Start with a **broad area of interest** from school, your hobbies, or intentions for the future.
* Use a **lotus diagram** to explore potential topics to investigate more deeply.
* What could you write a question about? You could look at **Who** is involved and **What** is interesting about what they do or **Why** they are important or even **What** **kind** of people. You could look at **When** important changes occurred and **Why** they happened. Topics where there are **more than one side to the story** are best.
* Use **PMI** (plus, minus interesting) and/or **SWOT** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis to determine which topic will allow you to design the best question.
* Use a **spider diagram** to consider the possible processes you could use to gather information on the topic.

# Refine your question:

* Start with an **initial question** based on your narrowed topic
* Use **preliminary research** to limit the scope of your research
* Modify your question so you can **make judgements** based on your research

# Continue refining as your research progresses.

Your question focus and wording will change as you find out more and redirect your research.

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# Examples of developing an initial research question:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Broad Topic >** | **Narrowed Topic >** | **Focused Topic >** | **Research Question** |
| Women's health | Women & cancer | Women smokers & breast cancer | Is there a connection between cigarette smoking and breast cancer risk? |
| Computer games | Computer game violence | Computer game violence & children | How does violence in computer games affect children? |
| Eating disorders | Teens & eating disorders | Teen peer pressure & bulimia | What role, if any, does peer pressure play in the development of bulimia in teens? |

Question Stems

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Good | Bad |
| How useful is….  To what extent…  How accurate…  Why…  What is the best way to… | ‘What’ questions  Obvious answers or questions you know the answer to  Too broad or narrow  Questions that confirm what you think already (Why are dogs better than cats?) |

# Criteria for a good research question:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| Limited | If a question is too general, you will be overwhelmed by useless information.  See “Examples of limiting your question” below. |
| Specific | Use preliminary research to narrow your focus. If your topic is too broad, you won’t have time to thoroughly research it. |
| Realistic | You need to be sure you have access to a range of reliable sources of information on the topic such as books and relevant interviewees. |
| Challenging | The goal of your research should be more than just finding facts. You should investigate something that requires you to analyse and make judgements. |
| Safe and Ethical | Your research should not have potential to cause physical or emotional harm to yourself or others. Avoid anything dangerous or morally tricky. |
| Clear | The wording of your question should be concise and use correct grammar. A well-structured question makes it easier to identify key aspects for research. |

# Examples of limiting your question:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| geographical area | What environmental issues are most important in South Australia |
| culture | How does the environment fit into the Kuarna world view? |
| time frame | What are the most prominent environmental issues of the last 10 years? |
| discipline | How does environmental awareness effect business practices today? |
| population group | What are the effects of air pollution on senior citizens? |

# Example of refining a question:

**Draft 1 Research Question:** Why is there a mystery about the ship, the *Mary Celeste*?

**Draft 2 Research Question:** What are the theories regarding the disappearance of the crew of the *Mary Celeste*?

**Refined Research Question:** To what extent is mutiny the most likely cause of the abandonment of the ship the *Mary Celeste?*

* Notice that *Draft 1* leads you towards a description of why a mystery exists. Whilst this is not an incorrect question, it lacks focus upon the ‘truth’, i.e. the best possible theory for the mystery that you are interested in.
* *Draft 2* focuses more upon the actual theories but only requires you to outline each one. Again, this suggests a more descriptive, rather than analytical, approach.
* The *Refined Research Topic* allows you to show your thinking about the theories. By asking ‘to what extent’, you are required to make a considered judgement about the mutiny theory in comparison with the other theories. This enables you to demonstrate higher order thinking skills and show the depth of your knowledge and understanding of all the different theories*.*