

# Developing a Research Question

It is essential to develop a research question that you are 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 issue for your research, one that actually can be researched. 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. Sometimes the number of sources you find will help you discover whether your research question is too broad, too narrow, or okay?

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 setting out to actually work on completing it.

## Topic/Issue

A topic is what the NHD project 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 NHD project in order to have a coherent product.

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 Neither Too Broad or Too Narrow

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

What is the 1994 rate of juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?

What can we do to reduce juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?

Does education play a role in reducing juveniles' 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.

# Evaluate Your Own Research Question

Evaluate the quality of your research question and the ease with which you should be able to answer it.

Ask yourself:

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?  
For example, to answer the research question, "What impact has deregulation had on commercial airline safety?," will 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 be able to provide the information I need to answer my research question (journals, books, Internet, government documents, people)?
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?

## Exercise 1: Can the Topic Be Researched?

Below are four exercises designed to improve your ability to select a good research question.

**Do/do not the economies that result from a trash-burning plant outweigh?**

True  
False

**Does McDonald's or Burger King make a better burger?**

True  
False

**Is Prozac a good treatment for clinical depression in certain cases?**

True  
False

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

True  
False

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

Below are four exercises designed to improve your ability to select a good research question. Select what you think is the best research question out of the three (neither too broad nor too narrow).

## Exercise 2A-Is Research Question Too Broad/Narrow?

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

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

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

## Exercise 2B-Is Research Question Too Broad/Narrow?

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

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

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

## Exercise 2C-Is Research Question Too Narrow/Broad?

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

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

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

## Exercise 2D-Is Research Question Too Broad/Narrow?

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

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

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

**Thesis:** Through the exploration of newly declassified documents concerning the end of Hitler's life, researchers have encountered new evidence which suggests that rather than dying in an underground Berlin bunker, Hitler escaped to South America where he lived for some years after the reported end of his life. This new evidence may result in the need to exchange the antiquated bunker story as the end of Hitler's life, for a new, intriguing continuation of his story.

**Research Questions:**