
From Topic to Research Question

The Research Question

The main question a research project aims to answer:

- Provides a summary of the research project
 - Establishes parameters of the inquiry
 - Provides a clue to the methodology
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Qualitative Research Questions

- Broad questions
 - About process or meaning
 - Often one central question and several subquestions to narrow the focus
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How to Formulate Qualitative Questions

- Begin with “what” and “how” – open design
 - Focus on a single phenomenon
 - Use exploratory verbs – see Appendix C
 - Discover, explore, understand, compare
 - Avoid directional words
 - Impact, effect, influence, cause, determine
 - Use open-ended questions
 - Specify the research setting
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Example of a Qualitative Question

- How do Japanese firms decide where to invest abroad?
 - How does the decision process develop?
 - What factors are important in the process?
 - What facilitates the process?
 - What hinders the process?
 - Who are the key participants?
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Quantitative Research Questions

- Specific
 - Test a theory – usually reformulated as a hypothesis
 - Contain at least one independent and one dependent variable, which must be measured separately
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Examples of Quantitative Questions

- To what degree do students attending private schools differ from students attending public schools in reading ability?
 - What are the components of reading ability and what is their relative importance?
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Good Research Questions Are...

Answerable through research

Be sure your question can be answered through observation and analysis.

- x Should Kazakhstan join the WTO?*
 - o What is the expected impact of WTO accession on Kazakhstan's trade balance?*
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Sufficiently limited

Avoid global questions—they cannot be answered in a thesis.

- x How did the 1997-1998 currency crisis affect the Indonesian economy?*
 - o How did the 1997-1998 currency crisis affect plywood exporting from Central Java?*
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Researchable by you

- Is there enough previous research?
 - Do I have (or can I acquire) the skills necessary to analyze the data?
 - Can I obtain the necessary data?
 - How many questions must be answered?
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Theoretically motivated

A theoretical framework (based in the literature) provides:

- A rationale for your research question
 - A structured explanation for what you expect to find
 - A framework to develop implications
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Example: Political Decentralization

Research question: What is the effect of political decentralization on citizen participation in local governance?

Rationale for asking the question: Current theories of political reform suggest a positive link between...

Expectation: Greater decentralization will result in greater citizen participation.

Worthwhile

- Having practical application
 - Explaining a phenomenon
 - Increasing understanding of a process
 - Resolving a controversy
 - Comparing two or more cases
 - Re-evaluating other studies
 - Testing a theory
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Ways to Develop a Good Research Project

- **Replicate a previous study** with slight variation or improvement
 - **Explore unexpected findings** of previous research
 - **Follow a suggestion** for future research
 - **Extend an existing explanation** to a new setting
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