



Designing research aims, objectives and questions

Chapter overview

This topic will introduce you to key elements of the business consultancy project proposal such as the research aims, objectives and questions. You will be able to learn about how to formulate these, as well as receive guidance on how to create the challenges part of the proposal. This topic showcases research, discussions, and group activities that will help you continue making progress with the proposal. You will read a review on formulating research questions which help enhance your knowledge. By the end of the topic, you will be able to create an outline of your research aims, objectives and questions as well as the challenges part of the proposal.

Learning outcomes

- Formulate clear research aims and objectives
- Develop research questions that align with the aims and objectives

Context section

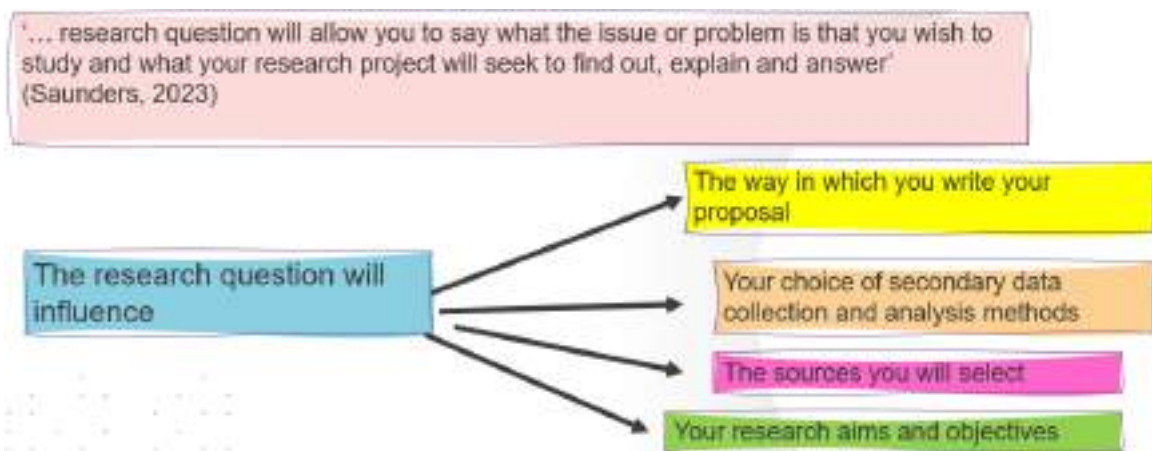
The research basics and the challenges parts form some of the key foundations of your proposal. It is essential that you follow the guidelines provided in the topic in order to formulate clear research aims, objectives and questions. These elements need to be directly linked to one another. It is essential that these are written in clear, coherent and formal language and they help create a logical 'story' within your proposal. Following the guidance in this topic will help you to get the basics right from the beginning so that you build on these in consequent topics.

1 Key components of a consultancy project



In this topic, we will be covering the research basics and the challenges sections of the proposal.

1.1 What is a research question?



Before you start the research process, it is crucial that you formulate your research topic as one or two well-defined research questions that your proposal will answer. The questions should be:

- Clear and targeted. Stated differently, the question should specify exactly what the writer must do.

- Neither too wide nor too specific. The scope of the inquiry should be suitable. It will be impossible to provide a comprehensive response within the allotted word count if the question is overly general. You won't have enough to write about and will find it difficult to formulate a compelling argument if it is too limited.

- Answering is not that simple. For instance, the question shouldn't only accept a yes-or-no response.

- Answering is not that hard. Within the allotted time and word count, you must be able to provide a comprehensive response to the question.

- Researchable. A sufficient quantity of high-quality research resources, including scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles, must be available to you. -Analytical instead of evocative. In other words, rather than just describing a problem or issue, your research question should enable you to provide an analysis of it (Monash University, 2023).

It is important to ensure that your research questions are clearly and directly linked to the challenges you identify in your proposal. You are expected to explore between one and three current, ongoing, and relevant challenges related to your chosen topic. These challenges should

form the foundation of your research focus. When drafting your research questions, carefully revisit each of these challenges and consider how they inform your overall research. Aim to develop one or two overarching research questions that reflect the core issues raised by these challenges and guide the direction of your research throughout the project.

1.2 Defining a research question

Before you develop your research questions, take some time to consider what truly captures your interest. You might want to read about the subject, discuss it with others, and start reflecting on specific areas that spark your curiosity to help generate ideas. As you read, stay alert for inspiration—research suggestions often appear at the end of journal articles, which can guide your methodology and help you come up with more focused questions.

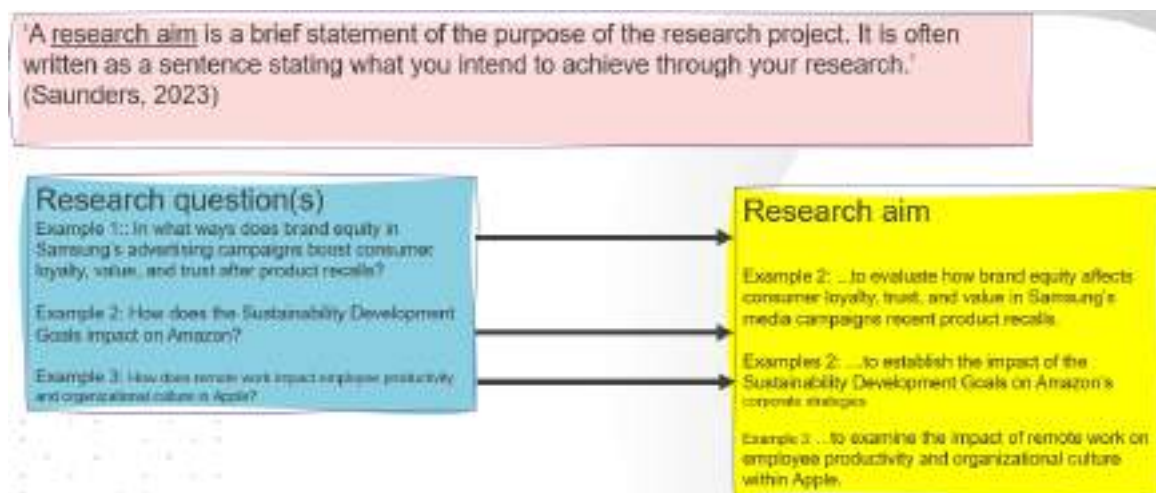
Even if you have a general topic in mind, you might still feel uncertain about your actual research question. To narrow it down, you may need to ask yourself several different questions. For example, if you're interested in "children's picture books," this by itself isn't a precise question. What aspects of them intrigue you? Is it their role in fostering young children's development over the last 20 years, their imaginative qualities, or their influence on reading skills? Additionally, framing your question as a "problem" might help. What specific information are you seeking about this problem, and why does it matter?

Another effective method for developing a question is brainstorming. Think about various potential questions that align with what you want to explore. It's also important to consider whether the question is feasible given the time and word count constraints you have. Does your research question align with your project's goals? It's crucial to carefully evaluate this. Your topic should engage you since you'll be working with it for an extended period, and you'll need the motivation to stay focused. However, merely finding a topic interesting isn't enough. The area you choose must also have existing literature. To organize your research, check the library databases to see if relevant materials are available for your chosen topic.

Avoid crafting overly broad questions, as they will yield excessive information and prevent you from diving deeply into the subject. On the other hand, overly narrow questions may lack enough content and make it difficult to meet the word count. You'll also need to think about what's realistic given the time you have available. Before finalizing your research question, consider what is practical and achievable.

The best research questions are clear and direct. A vague or ambiguous question will only lead to a confusing analysis. It can be helpful to share your research question with your module tutor for feedback. Remember, developing your research question is an ongoing process, and investing time at this stage will save you effort later. Be open to constructive criticism. Finally, keep in mind that your research question should be open-ended rather than rigid. As you progress through your research, you might find that your question evolves or refines itself. Stay flexible and allow your question to develop as you learn more (Adapted from University of Reading Library, 2025).

1.3 What is the research aim?

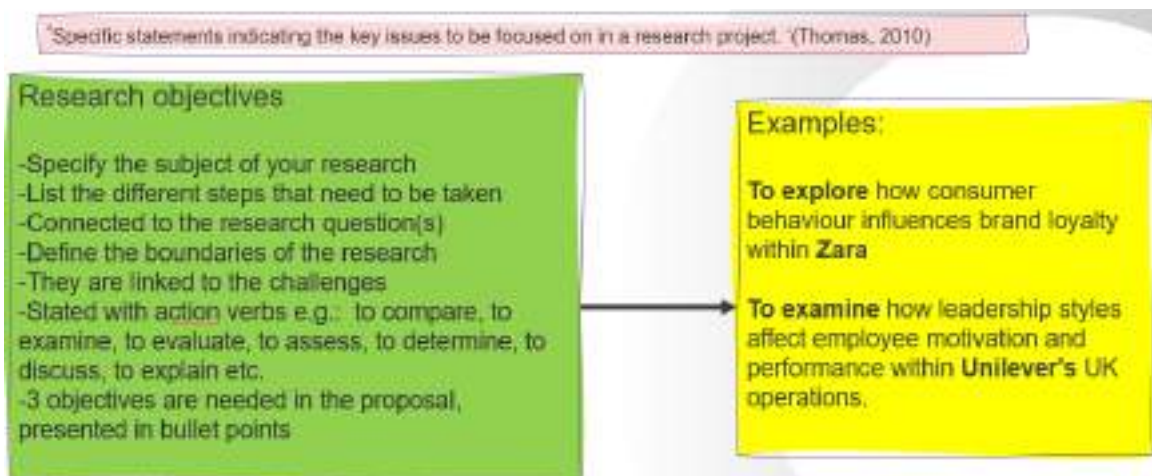


Research questions directly influence the research aims. However, the research aim should not be the same as the title of the proposal. Also, students need to avoid using the exact wording in the research questions and formulating it as a statement. The aim is frequently one sentence or a brief paragraph. It is a statement of your goals. The aim should be written so that it can be easily recognised once your proposal is finished.

Clear statements outlining the goals, objectives, or questions of a project's research typically do not emerge completely formed in an epiphany. They usually take time to create and finalise, and they usually appear gradually after careful consideration. Try to allow yourself enough time to consider your aims and objectives when you are first developing a project. This kind of thought should ideally not be rushed. Read up on your topic. Examine earlier research in the field. Examine the ways in which researchers formulate their aims and objectives. You are more likely to be able to successfully conceptualize your own research aims and objectives if you have a solid understanding of the available literature on your subject (Thomas and Hodges, 2010).

If you have trouble stating your research aims, it's possible that you're ultimately unsure of the purpose of your research. That's okay; a lot of us get ourselves there, especially if our research has taken a number of detours. It is not a reason to be critical of yourself, but rather to think about it and see if you can clarify what you are attempting to achieve. This can entail putting aside some of your initial questions or those you have been interested in. It is necessary to make sure your project is clear and focused rather than one where you'll be bogged down in a maze of doubts and uncertainties. It may seem apparent that you should be clear about your research questions and aim, and centre your work around them. However, it is essential to develop a focused, cohesive research topic that adds value. Finding out for yourself what you want to do is a crucial part of the research process, even though it might be challenging (Mick Cooper Training and Consultancy, 2021)

1.4 What are the research objectives?



Your research aim and the research question serve as complimentary means of expressing the focus of your research and give a clear idea of the setting you will be considering. Neither, however, provides enough information regarding the course of action—that is, the actions you must take in order to conduct your research. You must create a set of objectives to achieve this. Your question(s) can be operationalised—that is, the measures you will take to answer it—by using research objectives. In order to achieve your research aim, each research objective gives a precise and unambiguous definition of a particular aspect of the research (Saunders, 2023).

The research aim, objectives and questions need to be linked to each other to form a coherent and logical 'story' within your proposal. It is essential that you link the objectives to the challenges and indicate what actions you will be taking in order to achieve your aim and answer the research question(s).

You will be asked to provide 3 objectives, presented in bullet points. The objectives need to be formulated by using so-called action verbs. The definition of action verb is as follows: 'An [action verb](#) is a verb that expresses something that a person, animal, object, or process in nature (such as a storm) can do rather than expressing a state of being' (Thesaurus.com, 2021).

It is important that you avoid the use of vague, broad and generalized verbs such as: to appreciate, to learn, to read about, to believe, to study, etc.. Using broad expressions would make it difficult for you to evaluate if your objectives have been achieved. Action verbs describe what you will specifically do in your research. They assist you in avoiding ambiguous or passive language and in defining the extent of your research.

Here is a list action verbs which you might find helpful: compare, examine, evaluate, assess, determine, discuss, explain, analyse, argue, review, formulate, outline, highlight, critique, identify, measure, examine, determine etc.

1.5 Common mistakes of writing research, questions and aims

When formulating research objectives, one common issue is setting goals that are overly ambitious and unrealistic within the timeframe allocated for the project. Attempting to address too many complex issues at once can dilute the focus and impact of the research. Instead, objectives should be narrowed down to manageable, clearly defined goals that can feasibly be accomplished with the available resources and time.

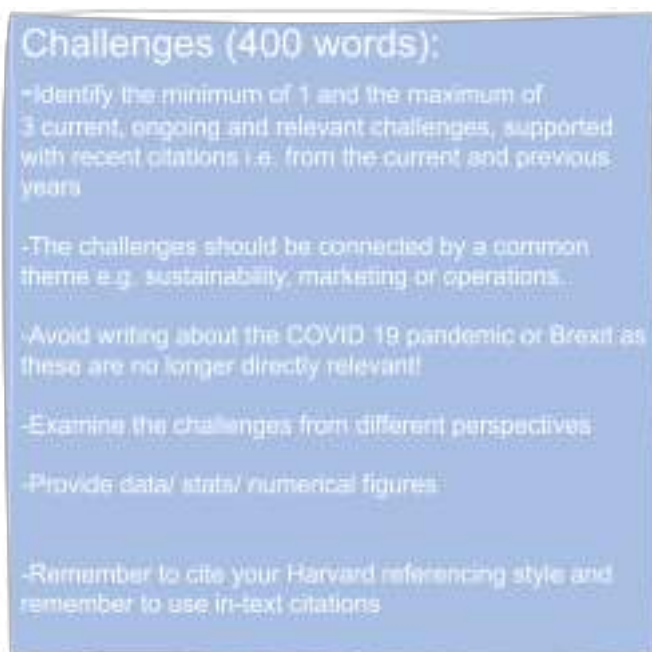
Another challenge often observed is the use of vague, broad, or generalised objectives. These lack specificity and fail to provide a clear direction for the research. Effective objectives should be concise and actionable, using strong action verbs to convey the intended outcomes. It is also essential to ensure that there is an appropriate number of objectives—too few may not sufficiently address the research aim, while too many can overwhelm and scatter the focus.

Additionally, redundancy between research questions and the main aim is a common pitfall. If they use identical or overly similar wording, it indicates a lack of clarity in defining the scope of the study. Objectives should also be carefully aligned with the research challenges; misalignment or choosing challenges that are irrelevant or unrelated to the chosen organisation weakens the proposal. Furthermore, overly lengthy research questions can confuse rather than clarify the intent of the study, and objectives that are repetitive or overlap each other can signal poor planning and organisation.

2 Key components of a consultancy project

In the followings, we shall be focusing on how to put together the challenges section.

2.1 How to write the challenges part?



You need to explore the minimum of 1 and the maximum of 3 challenges. This allows depth and detail for those students who would like to go further. The challenges section should be presented

in a formal, academic, and objective tone, demonstrating a clear application of critical thinking skills. Your analysis should not only describe the challenges but also critically evaluate the underlying causes and potential implications. You must engage with the material in a way that reflects your ability to assess and synthesize various viewpoints, providing a nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. To support your work, you should draw from a broad array of credible sources. These might include company reports, reputable news channels, academic articles, and information directly from the organisation's official website. By employing diverse sources, you can build a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis that accurately represents the complexity of the challenges the organisation faces.

It is essential that you choose relevant challenges which are ongoing and they have not been resolved by the organisation. The challenges part needs to be support with recent citations i.e. from the current or previous year. You can use some older citations if these are relevant to the discussions. However, you need to ensure that in addition to using slightly older sources, you also use references from the current and the previous year. To provide evidence, you could support your discussions with data/ stats/ numerical information. You could present charts/ graphs and provide up-to-date evidence of research. Please, however, remember to provide in-text citations and use the Harvard referencing style.

Please see below some examples of challenges which are NOT appropriate for the consultancy proposal.

Company	Issues	Not appropriate
Tracey's lemonade stand	No customers, poor turnover, staff shortages, recruiting problems	Tracey's Lemonade Stand is too small. The students will find it very difficult accessing the necessary data/research to provide an adequate introduction or critical analysis as the material would be too broad and not catered.
Enron	Corruption & Fraud: The company used accounting loopholes and questionable reporting to hide billions in debt. This was discovered in 2001.	Enron happened too long ago. This is not current or relevant.
Rio Tinto	Environmental Destruction: The company has been accused of destroying a heritage site in 2020 and the environment. Corruption & Cronyism: Accusations of bribery in Guinea in 2020.	This is not current or relevant.
Lehman Brothers	The company went bankrupt in 2008.	This is not an existing organisation and therefore it is not appropriate for the research.

2.2 How NOT to write the challenges part?

Challenges:

- Do not go over the expected 400 words
- Avoid referring to too many challenges
- Please do not cite informal blog sites or potentially biased sources e.g. Wikipedia
- Do not use frameworks e.g. SWOT, PESTLE, Porter's five forces
- Do not give recommendations
- Avoid using informal language as well as spelling mistakes
- Avoid using emotional, subjective language and a descriptive writing style

It is crucial for you to identify and select challenges that are both relevant to the chosen organisation and demonstrably unresolved at the time of writing. These challenges should reflect current, real-world issues that the organisation is actively facing, rather than historical or hypothetical problems that have already been addressed. To support their analysis, you must incorporate recent citations, specifically from the current or immediately preceding year, in order to ensure that the discussion remains timely and reflective of the organisation's present circumstances.

You are expected to demonstrate clear evidence of critical thinking, which includes the ability to evaluate, compare, and synthesise different viewpoints, question assumptions, and build coherent arguments supported by credible evidence. In addition, you should draw on a broad and diverse range of reliable sources. By using a variety of sources, you can present a well-rounded and comprehensive analysis that reflects a deep understanding of the organisational context and the complexities of the challenges it faces.

Informal sources are frequently authored by unidentified or underqualified people who lack the necessary subject-matter competence. This makes it challenging to evaluate the information's dependability. Unlike academic journals or reputable media outlets, biased and informal sites are not subject to peer review or editorial oversight. This means the content may contain factual errors, personal opinions, or manipulated information without correction. A lot of unofficial websites have economic, political, or personal goals. They may present information selectively or distort facts to influence opinions, rather than provide a balanced or evidence-based perspective.

Since COVID-19's most immediate and disruptive effects have mostly diminished, we would no longer consider it to be directly relevant. The majority of governments, businesses, and organizations have either recovered from or adjusted to the effects of the pandemic and have progressed past the crisis-management stage. The virus is no longer a major, erratic disruptor of international systems, but rather a persistent public health concern. Since the significant political, legal, and economic changes connected to the UK's exit from the European Union have already occurred, Brexit is no longer seen as a directly relevant challenge. The transition period concluded, and the UK formally exited the EU.

2.3 What are some typical business challenges?



You will be asked to identify some relevant and ongoing challenges. The above slide shows some examples however you can use other challenges apart from the above.

2.4 Remember to make connections to at least one of the below

When presenting the challenges faced by an organisation, you should strive to establish clear and meaningful connections to broader current affairs, recent news developments, or the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Making such connections not only enhances the relevance of your analysis but also serves as a way to demonstrate the breadth and depth of your external research and engagement with contemporary issues. It is critical that all claims and observations are substantiated with up-to-date references from credible and authoritative sources. These sources may include academic journals, reputable news outlets, government publications, and organisational reports. You should not rely on informal or potentially biased platforms, such as Wikipedia, as these do not meet the standards of academic integrity and reliability required in scholarly writing.

To strengthen the quality and critical depth of your analysis, you are encouraged to explore a variety of perspectives when linking organisational challenges to the external environment. For instance, you might investigate the ways in which political, economic, or environmental developments influence business strategy and operations. This could include exploring the impact of global supply chain disruptions, shifting consumer behaviours, regulatory changes, or geopolitical tensions. You should also consider the expectations and pressures placed on organisations to align with the SDGs—such as responsible consumption, climate action, and gender equality—and reflect on how these expectations shape strategic decision-making and operational priorities. Furthermore, exploring the relationship between the identified challenges and the organisation's ability to meet specific SDG targets can provide valuable insight into the complexity and urgency of the issues at hand.

In addition, you could examine how the organisation is portrayed in media coverage related to these challenges. Analysing of news articles can offer a deeper understanding of reputational risks, as well as how the organisation's actions are received by external stakeholders. This kind of analysis can serve as an important supplement to more traditional academic sources and can help you present a more nuanced and critically informed discussion. By incorporating these elements into your writing, you will not only demonstrate academic rigour but also show a well-rounded awareness of the interconnected nature of business challenges in today's global landscape.

2.5 What are some of Tesla's challenges?

Some potential challenges Tesla faces include the intensifying competition from overseas companies, which could threaten its market share, particularly as other nations increase their presence in the electric vehicle sector. Additionally, the leadership of Elon Musk, who is involved in several other high-profile ventures, might be spreading him too thin, potentially impacting his

ability to fully dedicate attention to Tesla's needs. The company is also grappling with falling stock prices, which could undermine investor confidence, alongside a growing demand for new leadership within the organisation. Furthermore, Tesla is experiencing declining sales across Europe, which could hinder its ability to maintain growth in key international markets.

Other pressing challenges involve a damaged reputation, likely due to various controversies and operational setbacks, as well as a dated model range that may no longer meet consumer expectations in an increasingly competitive market. Tesla's reputation as an industry leader in innovation is also under scrutiny, as the company may not longer perceived as the groundbreaking force it once was in the electric vehicle space. These factors combined create a complex set of obstacles for Tesla, requiring strategic adjustments and leadership decisions to maintain its market position (BBC News, 2025).

3 Review literature on formulating research questions

What is a Research Question?

A research question is one that the thesis statement of a study or research effort seeks to address. This question frequently refers to a problem or issue that is resolved in the study's conclusion through data analysis and interpretation. The research question is typically written to outline the population and variables to be investigated, the problem the study is trying to solve, and other features of the study. A research question is frequently based on research, as their name suggests. These questions are therefore dynamic, meaning that when researchers examine relevant material and create a study framework, they can alter or improve the research question.

Why is it important?

Creating a research question is crucial because it helps focus a wide range of interests into a particular field of study (Creswell, 2013). Along with hypotheses, research questions provide a framework for direction. These inquiries also clearly define the parameters of the research, establishing its bounds and guaranteeing its unity. Furthermore, the rest of the study is impacted by the research topic. The research technique, sample size, data collecting, and data analysis are all impacted by these questions (Lipowski, 2008).

What are the type of research questions?

Depending on the kind of study to be conducted, research questions can be divided into many categories. Writing good research questions can be aided by knowing the kind of study one wants to conduct, whether it be mixed-methods, quantitative, or qualitative. The following list of typical research question categories is provided by Doody and Bailey (2016).

Quantitative research questions

Research questions that are quantitative are exact. The population to be examined, the dependent and independent variables, and the research strategy to be employed are usually included in these inquiries. Typically, they are finalized and framed at the beginning of the study (Berger, 2015). The relationship between the research question and the research strategy is also established by quantitative research questions. Furthermore, there are no "yes" or "no" answers to these queries. Therefore, terms like "is," "are," "do," and "does" are not used in quantitative research inquiries. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), quantitative research questions typically aim to comprehend specific social, familial, or educational events or processes that take place in a given context and/or region.

They can be further divided into three categories: relational, comparative, and descriptive. The purpose of descriptive research questions is to either describe factors that the study will measure or gauge how the population of a study responds to one or more variables. Usually, these inquiries start with "what." In order to identify specific processes, students strive to answer the research question. Finding the differences between two or more groups for an outcome variable is the goal of comparative research questions. These inquiries may also be causal. The researcher might, for example, contrast a group with a particular variable present and another group without it.

Investigating and defining patterns and interactions between two or more variables is the goal of relationship research topics. Both dependent and independent variables are frequently included in this research question design, along with terms like "association" and "trends."

Qualitative research questions

Both more general and more specialized fields of study may be covered by qualitative research questions. Qualitative research questions are connected to study design, just like quantitative research questions. However, qualitative research questions are typically more flexible, non-directional, and adaptive than their quantitative counterparts (Creswell, 2013). Because of this, research that employs these questions typically seeks to "discover," "explain," or "explore."

Mixed-method studies

A set of both quantitative and qualitative research questions is usually necessary for mixed-methods investigations. When a mixed-methods study concentrates on the importance and distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods rather than the integrative component of the investigation, separate questions are suitable (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Another choice available to researchers is to formulate a single mixed-methods study topic. This implies an integrated process or component between the study's quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, claim Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010).

How to develop a good research question?

Before learning how to write a research paper, you must learn how to construct a research question. Using the research topic definition as a guide, formulate your query. According to Stone (2002), a great research question should be significant, pertinent, and carefully considered. Developing a research question can be difficult, but there is a method you can employ to make it simpler. The following procedures will assist you in formulating a research question:

Start broad

A wide topic gives authors many options to consider when trying to come up with a good research question. Brainstorming and concept mapping are two methods that might assist you in breaking down a topic into subtopics and possible research questions. For instance, you can expand on concepts from your conversations and pose challenging questions to your peers. By using these strategies, you can arrange your ideas such that you can find themes and connections within a wide subject. Selecting a topic that you are truly interested in is a smart idea because your motivation levels during your research will be influenced by your level of interest in the subject.

Learn about topical issues

You can begin conducting preliminary research as soon as you have chosen a topic. This preliminary phase of study achieves two objectives. First, you can find topics that are being debated by academics and other researchers right now by doing a preliminary study of related literature. In this manner, you acquire current, pertinent information on your subject. Second, you can identify any gaps or limits in the current understanding of your topic by conducting an initial examination of related literature. These gaps can then be used as the topic of your research question after some fine-tuning.

Narrow down your topic

You can begin concentrating on a more specialized field of study and developing a research question if you have acquired sufficient knowledge about the subject you wish to investigate. One choice is to concentrate on recent publications or knowledge gaps. Known as "gap-spotting" by Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), this approach entails formulating research questions based on recognized gaps in the literature and neglected fields of inquiry. In a similar vein, researchers can select study questions that build upon or enhance the conclusions of previously published works.

Problematization is an additional technique for formulating and finding research topics (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Problematization is a research question methodology that seeks to examine and criticize presumptions that bolster the researcher's and others' theoretical stances. This entails formulating research questions that contradict your opinions or your understanding of the field. Conversely, Lipowski (2008) highlights how crucial it is to take the researcher's individual experiences into account while formulating a research topic. For example, practitioners who are also researchers can consider problematic aspects of their work. Trends and patterns in practice can also offer fresh perspectives and possible examples for research questions.

Evaluate your research question

You ought to have a list of possible research questions at this stage. You must assess each possible choice according to its soundness in order to reduce the number of options. A good

research question must be relevant in addition to being precise or unambiguous. You may use the “FINER” criteria to find out if you have a good research question (Hulley et al., 2007). The FINER criteria are outlined below:

Below is a summary of the FINER criteria:

F - Feasible The feasibility of a good research question indicates that it is well within the researcher's scope of investigation. Given their abilities and the resources at their disposal, researchers should be realistic about the scope of their work as well as their capacity to gather data and finish it. Having a backup plan in place is also a good idea in case something goes wrong. The perfect research question is one that interests the researcher as well as their community and peers. The researcher is more motivated to see the subject addressed as a result of this interest.

N- Novel You should formulate your research topic to add fresh perspectives to the area of study you are examining. For example, the question might support or expand on earlier research on the subject you are studying. When formulating a research question, this is one of the most crucial factors to take into account. Review boards and the relevant authorities must approve your research question and the study that follows.

R-Relevant

The research question should not only be intriguing and unique, but also pertinent to the scientific community and those working in your field of study. Your study question should, if at all feasible, be pertinent to the interests of the general audience.

Create your research question

In order to guarantee clarity, research questions should be appropriately constructed, taking into account their significance. Seek for excellent examples of research questions. You can properly develop a research question using a variety of frameworks. Below is an explanation of the two most popular frameworks.

The PICOT framework

Richardson et al. (1995) first presented the PICOT research question structure in 1995. Research questions can be developed using the PICOT framework to address key components of the study, such as the population to be examined, the anticipated results, and the time required to attain the results. The framework is more frequently utilised in clinical research and evidence-based studies when these components are present.

P- population, patients, issue,

I-intervention under investigation C-comparison group O-outcome

T-timeframe of the study

Common mistakes of research questions

It's critical to recognise typical problems when crafting a research question because they can compromise the efficacy and clarity of your investigation. By being aware of these traps, you can make sure that your research question is sound and positioned to successfully direct your investigation. Creating a study topic that is excessively general or ambiguous is one of the most common errors. Such inquiries may result in research that is not well-focused and hinder the ability to reach significant conclusions. By precisely outlining the bounds and extent of your research, you can strive for specificity. **Lack of Feasibility:** Considering your available resources, time limits, and data availability, it is critical to make sure that your research question is practical. It might not be feasible to look at questions that are too complex or ambitious.

Ambiguous Language: Misunderstandings regarding the purpose and emphasis of your research may result from the use of ambiguous or confusing terminology. Aim for accuracy in your language to improve readability and enable successful audience communication. **Redundancy** or the pursuit of issues that have previously been sufficiently addressed may arise from neglecting to examine existing literature before developing your research subject. Finding knowledge gaps and guiding your study topic require a thorough literature evaluation.

Important considerations

One of the most important first steps in the research process is formulating the appropriate research question. The following important points should aid researchers in their quest:

-Iteratively developing a research question entails updating one's understanding of the subject and honing concepts at every turn (Maxwell, 2013). -Keep abreast with the latest developments in the topic you are studying, including cutting-edge research projects, technology advancements, and current trends. -To guarantee clarity, make the research question as precise as succinct as you can. Steer clear of words or phrases that don't further the study question's meaning.

-Consult with mentors, coworkers, and subject-matter experts in addition to conducting a literature review. These comments can be helpful in developing the rest of the study as well as in answering the research topic. Last but not least, avoid making the two most frequent errors when phrasing research questions: framing a question as a method and framing a question as an anticipated contribution (Mayo et al., 2013).

(Source: Adapted from Bouchrika, 2023)



Essential reading

Bouchrika, I. (2023). *How to Write a Research Question: Types, Steps, and Examples*. [online] research.com. Available at: <https://research.com/research/how-to-write-a-research-question> [22 April 2025]

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