

# Strong Research Questions and Introductions to Research Articles

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## Abstract

The primary goal of this outline is to help you develop an original research question. In terms of both style and content, this exercise should resemble the “introduction” section of a research article that you might find in a good academic journal such as the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, or *Social Forces*. Research papers, especially their introduction sections, should not be written “off the top of your head.”

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# 1 Clearly articulated statement of your research question

Keep in mind that your question is a question about causal relationships among variables. This should be phrased as such: *does variation in Y depend on variation in X?* An example from a [recent paper](#) is below:

- Does variation in county-level presence of Tea Party organizations depend on variation in residential segregation by education levels

Note that you do not need to operationalize your variables in this section (that would come later in the paper in the data and methods section and is, therefore, not part of this assignment). Take a considerable amount of time developing a good question before you begin your work. Remember, you are looking to set up both an academic and a substantive puzzle. A good puzzle does not have an obvious solution. And remember to be very clear about what are your dependent and independent variable(s), and your units of analysis. You can start with a question about the relationship between two variables, and that may be all that you need.

# 2 Situating your research question in relation to extant research

This is important since you are being asked to use research, relevant to your topic, to develop an original research question. Note that in an “introduction” section, you are using readings to set up a question, rather than to develop hypotheses. In the example above (the [Tea Party paper](#)), note the way in which the authors are using articles and books in the academic literature to set up the question rather than to theorize the question (development of a theoretical argument and hypotheses come later in the paper? and are not included in the introduction section). I know from past experience that this is something that students struggle with (they jump too quickly to theorizing or providing a literature review). You should be thinking along the lines of the following:

- What kind of question is this?
- What broader process does it exemplify?
- What will be question contribute to this broader literature that is different from what is already in the literature?

### 3 Situating your research question in its historical and/or cultural context

If the reader is to fully appreciate the significance of your research question, it is almost always necessary to provide background information. Do not assume that your readers are already familiar with your general topic. In the [Tea Party paper](#), for example, notice how the authors provided some historical background regarding the Tea Party movement and also some actual descriptive data that draws attention to the substantive puzzle. Note that the introduction section sets up an interesting substantive puzzle:

- Why was the Tea Party so popular when it was calling for the government to do nothing at a time when the nation was in the midst of a severe economic crisis?
- Do patterns of residential segregation (by education) help us to understand this puzzling phenomenon?

#### *Breakdown of the Introduction Section:*

1. General background statement about the relationship between the variables  
*“Social movements engage in various sorts of action to achieve their goals.”*
2. An example (or two) about how that relationship works  
*“For example, social movements can lobby politicians or engage in petition drives to impact policy change.”*
3. A coherent research question, which can be rephrased, and an reason why that relationship works  
*“Protest may influence the likelihood of changing educational policy because it raises politicians’ awareness of the issue and pressures them to respond with concessions.”*

## Example 1

People participate in social movement activity for various reasons. For some, a shared sense of identity makes them feel connected to a social movement (Corrigall-Brown et al. 2009; Futrell and Simi 2004), for others, being available for participation increases their likelihood of participation (McAdam 1986). Who you know, or the ties you have to people in your social network might be an important yet overlooked factor for understanding participation (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). For example, a person might be more likely to engage in civil disobedience if they know someone who is either participating, has heard about, or even organized the event, who has informed them about the event. Understanding the role of political ties to others might shed light on an unexplored area in the study of social movement participation.

## Example 2

United States parks are recreational areas that can contribute to our physical and psychological well-being (Tate 2018). Yet, adequate funding for operations and maintenance, programs, capital expenditures, and land acquisition pose significant challenges for parks (Walls 2009). Public restrooms available in parks are impacted by these budget worries as well. Public restrooms are also being closed in many American states due to real or perceived drug-use or sexual activity (Brubaker and McCreary, 2007). This problem is exacerbated by bad design, poor maintenance and management, unequal distribution as well as crime. These public restroom closures impact everyone who utilizes public park spaces, yet women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly are particularly hit the hardest (Greed 2003). Any decline in public restrooms in public parks can discourage specific communities from visiting or limit the length of their visit. Therefore, studying the presence or disappearance of quality public restrooms in a park might shed light on park visitation.

### Example 3

The United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world. While the United States is only home to 5 percent of the world's population, it houses 25 percent of the world's prisoners equating to 2.2 million people behind bars (Collier, 2014). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 41 percent of American prisoners do not have their high school diploma or GED compared to only 18 percent in the general population (Harlow, 2003). Additionally, nineteen percent of adult inmates are illiterate, compared to our national adult illiteracy rate of four percent (Karpowitz and Kenner, p.4). Research suggests that having a high school diploma is no longer enough to qualify a candidate for employment in many occupations (Edwin, 2018). While many factors impact recidivism rates, research suggests that education is one of the most effective deterrents for recidivism and increasing post-release employment opportunities (Karpowitz & Kenner, RAND, Steurer & Smith, 2003). Examining the effect of carceral education, and specifically differences in types of carceral education, on employment outcomes, is important in the quest for limiting the revolving door of incarceration.

## Example 4

The growing shift to decolonize museums in the United States has seen a push in the last thirty years due to the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). In that time, scholars have debated the validity of repatriating artifacts as well as critique the process laid out by NAGPRA and ensuing related congressional acts (Spude & Scott, 2013; Stoffle & Evans, 1994). Issues regarding repatriation resource constraints such as funding staff to catalogue and organize the necessary artifacts (Livesay, 1992) and institutional perspectives on the importance invested within artifacts such as their role in the archaeological record may lead to varied repatriation outcomes. Yet, why are some museums more proactive in the repatriation of artifacts than others? While many scholars draw on case studies of NAGPRA repatriation requests to illustrate museums' adherence or resistance, the language used in museums' mission statements provide an alternative perspective to investigate compliance with NAGPRA repatriation requests.

## Example 5

Transit-oriented development (TOD), a type of urban development that places dense, mixed-use development near transit, has emerged as a significant planning tool for reducing vehicle-miles travelled and greenhouse gas emissions. This development concept aims to promote the use of public transportation, while also functioning as a form of self-selection for residents with a preference for transit-oriented living (Cervero 2007). The success of the strategy, however, depends on a variety of factors. TOD parking supply and pricing policy, in particular, play an important role in supporting transit ridership objectives (Wilson 2005), including increased ridership and a more sustainable transportation mode share. Understanding the connection between parking policy, TOD, and transit ridership is critical to the study of transportation planning.