

Sage Research Methods

Developing a Researchable Question

Product: Sage Research Methods

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526408525>

Access Date: December 20, 2025

Online ISBN: 9781526408525

© All Rights Reserved.

Developing a Researchable Question

Introduction

This stage will:

- Explain how to develop your research question
- Provide an overview of different types of research questions
- Help you decide if your research question is suitable

The objective of social research should be to discover something new about the social world. To achieve this you need a research question and you need to develop one (or a set of questions) which is researchable, in practice.

How Do I Develop a Research Question?

Here are four possible approaches to developing your research question(s). These are not mutually exclusive.

Descriptive

You may hope to work on a general description of a social context. Often, descriptive [ethnography](#) takes this form. However, you need to focus on particular aspects of that context which are especially interesting and which result in an understanding which can be generalized beyond the particular context of your research.

Hypothesis

You may wish to test a [hypothesis](#). This means you have constructed a specifically formulated statement which can be falsified. This is the dominant approach in [experimental research](#). Usually you will employ [statistical methods](#) to test a [null hypothesis](#), which asserts the opposite of the proposition you are testing.

If, for example, your hypothesis is that there is a difference in political attitudes among the people of different ethnic backgrounds in a specific country, you might look at a sample of survey data to test this. In this case, the null hypothesis is that no difference in political attitudes can be found.

Quasihypothetical

You may have some developed ideas about what you wish to engage with, but not a formal testable hypothesis.

Grounded Theory

Alternatively, your methodological approach may be based on [grounded theory](#). You do not have a hypothesis that you wish to test, but rather you will work in context and the important questions will emerge as you interact systematically with the data you generate from your research.

Read more about [grounded theory](#)

When Will I Know What My Research Question Is?

If you are working with a **hypothesis**, then you already have your research question(s), although these may be amended as you test your null hypothesis.

If you are taking a **descriptive** or **quasi-hypothetical** approach, you will usually formulate your research question as you finish your literature review. At that point you will know enough about the topic, its context, and how others have written about it to draw your ideas together into a formal question, or set of questions. These will structure your research and your writing.

If you are taking a **grounded theory** approach, these questions will not emerge until you have had considerable engagement with the research field and have developed a systematic understanding of the issues.

In practice, researchers often develop a set of questions at the end of their literature review and add/amend/delete them as they do the actual research and engage with the field and their own research materials.

How Do I Know if My Research Question Is Suitable?

How Do I Know if My Research Question Is Suitable?

Your question, or set of questions, must be ones that you can work with. You need to be able to answer them using your knowledge to frame them, your research skills to address them, and within the time you have available.

[Search for resources about research questions](#)

[Search for resources about developing a hypothesis](#)

Types of Research Questions: Why? When? Who? How? Where?

When developing and answering your research questions, you should be aware of the specific usage of these words in a social science context.

Why?

“Why” questions seek causal explanations. If you ask “why?” the answer begins with “because.”

When?

When questions locate:

- Events in relation to the time at which they happened
- Processes in relation to when they happened and their duration
- The setting of things in temporal order, or sequencing
- Boundaries of the context of your research.

These last two types of “when” questions have implications for causality and for the generalizations you may be able to make from your research.

Who?

Who questions address agency. They seek to identify the persons, institutions, or collective bodies responsible for the things you are researching. You may use who questions simply to identify an informant: “Who told me this?” But you may also use them to indicate specific agency as the cause of an event.

How?

How questions are about mechanisms. The answers describe ways in which things are done, which together result in a given outcome. These questions might cover:

- How you carry out your own research.
- The accounts you generate from your research to indicate how something happened.

Note that there is overlap between **how** and **why questions** when dealing with events or system states. Both are addressing *cause*.

Where?

Where questions (like **when questions**) set your research in context. It is important to understand the social world in terms of contextual spaces and circumstances. Both **where** and **whenquestions** should generate answers which help you define the extent to which you can generalize the results of your research.

What Do You Want Your Research to Tell You About the World?

Your research should tell you enough about the world so that you can answer one or more of the following questions. Each answer you generate will be linked to one of the purposes and emphasis of your research, so it's important to think about this as you're developing your research questions.

Which of the following are you hoping your research will tell you?

- **What is the world like?**
- **What caused this aspect of the world to be as it is?** You will aim to identify cause(s).
- **Did this intervention in the world work?** Did it do what it was supposed to do? If it did, how did it work? If it didn't, why didn't it work?
You will carry out an evaluation.
- **Have we changed the world?** If so, in what way have we changed it? If so, how did we achieve that change?

These questions are appropriate for an action research project.

Read more about [evaluation](#)

Read more about [action research](#)

What Kinds of Change Can My Research Identify?

Change matters! Much of social research is concerned with change. In [experi-](#)

ments and [action research](#) we try to create change. In [observational studies](#) we try to see what change has happened. Sometimes, of course, we are interested in why things stay the same.

Here are some examples of the types of change you might identify:

- **Changes of kind:** Most social science disciplines are concerned with changes of kind. We are interested in the way things become different in terms of the kind of things they are.
- Changes of degree: Some social science is concerned with changes of degree. For example, we may do research on changes in educational achievement.

How Do I Identify and Measure Change?

Identifying change always involves some sort of [measurement](#), even if that measurement is implicit.

- **Taxonomies:** Social scientists—and other scientists—use classifications to describe different systems. We would do this to identify changes in kind. This process involves the construction of taxonomies, which are systematic sets of types of entities.
- **Continuous scales of measurement:** To assess changes of degree, we use continuous scales of measurement. For example, we would use a scoring system to measure changes in educational achievement.

[Search for resources about measurement](#)

How Can My Research Explore and Explain?

Exploration and **explanation** are terms you can use in a general sense in your research project. (You have probably encountered their use in a general sense in exam papers). They also have a specific meaning in relation to statistical methods.

General Meanings

Exploration is about description. When we explore, we describe an aspect of the social world.

Explanation is concerned with the specification of causes. When we explain, we say this is how an aspect of the social world came to be.

Statistical Methods

Exploration in statistical terms means looking at the data to see what they are telling us. We don't have a hypothesis to test, but instead use the data as a description of the social world and how we can understand it.

Explanation in statistics concerns the testing of an exact hypothesis, which is completely separate from the actual data we use to test it.

How Can My Research Evaluate?

Evaluation is an important task of social research and many social research projects are evaluations of social interventions.

What Works?

This is the big question. What can we do in order to achieve defined objectives?

Here are some examples of research intervention objectives:

- To improve the reading ability of primary school children
 - To implement effective processes for reducing premature mortality from coronary heart disease
 - To develop ways in which we can reduce burglary in a particular area.
-

How Can We Tell What Works?

Some social scientists assert that only [randomized controlled trials](#) can tell us what works. Others argue that the social world is *complex*, and we always have to think that causation may not be attributable to a single factor in any intervention.

Questions to Ask

In evaluating, we need to ask the following questions:

Did this work?

To answer this question we must have some clear description of what outcomes we were attempting to achieve.

How did this work?

To answer this question we must be able to identify the mechanisms which led to a specific outcome(s). These may be single and simple, or they may be multiple

and complex.

When and where did it work?

This question deals with the boundaries in time and area of the specific intervention.

When and where can it work?

This question deals with the possibility or otherwise of making generalizations from the intervention.

The Importance of Context

Biological interventions can be contextual. For example, it is well known that BCG immunization, which is very effective against tuberculosis in temperate climates, does not work in the tropics because people have different existing immunities.

Social interventions are even more contextually dependent. It is possible to transfer effective interventions from one context to another, but we have to do so with care, by identifying what is transferrable and what is not.

Checklist: What Makes a Researchable Question?

You've identified the general area of your research and reviewed some of the literature. Are you now able to work out a researchable question?

Here are seven questions to ask yourself. Remember, it's possible that not all will apply to you.

- **Do I know enough about the area I'm working in to formulate one or more interesting questions which relate to current issues or debates?**

- **Do I know which methods I am going to use in my research?**

If not, see [this section](#)

- **Do I have the necessary competence in these methods? If not, can I acquire it in time to do this research?**

- **Do I have the resources I need: equipment, office space, materials, support?**

- **Can I get access to the research field?**

- **Do I have the time needed to complete the work using the methods I've identified?**

- **Do I have time to analyze my research findings, write them up coherently, and draw the project to a conclusion?**

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526408525>