

# Template

## Example Slides

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# Research Purpose

What is the purpose of research?

In a nutshell, research is the process by which we answer an open question we have about the world.

A good question involves 3 ingredients:

- A theory about the way the world works
- An unknown aspect of the world implied by the theory
- A way to observe the unknown aspect of the world and learn from it

Researchers are basically people who never grew out of the “but why?” phase of childhood.

# Policy Research Purpose

Policy research functions much the same way:

- A problem has been identified
- A policy - informed by theories about the problem - has been implemented
- An observable effect on the problem and related areas can be documented

A policy researcher has an advantage in that often theories about a problem and policy solution can come from external actors - elected officials, administrators, advocates, public debates or news coverage all regularly provide theories about the world.

The disadvantage: policy is an interdisciplinary area so the starting point for a problem can be more difficult to discern.

# What is Theory

Theory provides a simple model for understanding why some aspect of the world functions the way that it does.

Theory is necessarily simplified to a set of limited and most immediately relevant factors in the function we are thinking about.

# Disciplines and Theory

Many academic disciplines can be defined by a combination of their share philosophy of research methods and the theories that guide their research enterprises. For instance:

- Economics focuses on utility maximization, incentives, and exchanges between people.
- Sociology focuses on social relationships, norms, cultures, and institutions.
- Political Science focuses on the rules of government and how people respond and behave according to different sets of governing rules and institutions.
- Psychology focuses on cognitive processes, emotional responses, and motivations behind behaviors.

Collectively, alongside technical issues from STEM fields, these major disciplines provide theoretical foundations for many of the issues we encounter in studying public policy.

## Example - School Accountability

**Problem:** Concern in the 1980's that Americans were falling behind internationally in terms of literacy and knowledge of mathematics.

**Theory:** Schools do not face accountability pressures from the public regarding student growth or performance.

# What is a research question?

A research question asks about something related to the theory driving the question.

People dislike frictions in their daily lives, so do bus schedules have a strong influence on whether people ride the bus?

The text in red provides a theory about the basic state of the world and the text in blue gives us a research question about a transit policy that we might be able to answer and, in doing so, speak to the validity of the theory.

# A Good Research Question

A good research question:

- Can be answered with the collection of observable data
- Can provide general insights about the theory driving the question
- Contains an implied hypothesis about the world related to the underlying theory



# School Accountability

Some example questions:

- How do schools affect student learning? (Dobbie and Fryer 2011)
- Does sharing information about school performance change or improve school operations? (Craig, Imberman, and Perdue 2015)
- Does giving teachers bonuses change school performance? (Stephen B. Holt 2022)
- Are there other outcomes that schools produce? (Jackson 2018; Stephen B. Holt and Gershenson 2019)

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