

WHY TO HAVE A RESEARCH QUESTION

A research paper is a problem- and source-based documentation of a piece of research. Its purpose is to communicate your message. The main goal of research papers is to examine a (one single) problem within the field of your study, whereas the secondary goal is to demonstrate the state of the art in that field.

A good research paper is built around one single message formulated in a research question. The research question is the single core question you ask to answer in the conclusions of your paper. This means that all included material should be related to the focussed examination of this question and logically lead to the answer in the conclusions. The research question is the central problem of your research around which you organize your paper. As the organising point of the research paper, the research question indicates the transformation of knowledge.

The research question is often formulated in statement form as the thesis statement of the paper. The thesis statement gives the single central claim you argue for in your paper and is at the same time the statement of what you concluded in your research. For the validation of your thesis statement make it answer to a tentative research question and make sure that your research effort is not limited to finding information that "proves" what you state in your thesis.

A good research question warrants that you formulate the problem or a gap in your field with the potential to unbiased answer. To formulate a research question, you need knowledge of what is already known and published on the problem or on related problems (theories, methods, data). The answer to the research question should be possible by means of the theories, methods, and data presented in your research paper. To enable an adequate answer in the given frame, restrict the number of theories and methods, and also the amount of data leading to your conclusions. Include these limitations possibly into your research question and make it narrow.

The best way to formulate your research question is to put it into an open question rather than a closed one. The latter is only possible where a clear *yes-or-no* answer can be anticipated. In any other case, use an open question with a question word. Prefer putting a *why*- or a *how*-question to asking a *what*-question. *Why*-questions make it easy to include analysis and interpretation into the research paper, *how*-questions are useful for discussion and evaluation, whereas *what*-questions only allow for a descriptive approach.

Formulating your research question and including it into your paper will help you to focus on your message and communicate it to your readers. They will get your point more precisely if the search for an answer to your research question creates the backbone of your paper. Then, your readers will be led by your convincing logical argumentation towards the answer in your conclusions section.