

Choosing a Research Question

The deadline for your research paper is coming up and you're still not sure what you want to focus on!

But before we choose a topic and question, let's clarify what we mean by research.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines research as:

A systematic investigation or inquiry aimed at contributing to knowledge of a theory, topic, or so forth by careful consideration, observation or study of a subject.

Research and travel are similar: whenever we set out on an adventure, we have some sort of idea where we're going but we might not know exactly what will happen. Choosing a research question is kind of the same: we pull out our map and decide the general area we want to explore before gradually zooming in and sorting out our final destination.

The first consideration on our journey to a research question looks at the difference between research ideas, topics and questions.

Ideas offer a general description of a phenomenon but lack specificity [Example on screen: I'm interested in travel and economies]

A research topic will be the starting point of every successful research project. It is an ongoing process by which we explore, define, and refine our ideas to determine the subject or issue we want to focus on.

A research question is an aspect of that topic that captured your interest, and you would like to explore further. A good research question will identify a theme that will help you navigate existing research and will provide guidance on how to add or eliminate literature. At the end of the road, we want a research question that is clear, concise and can be answered.

Although it might sound contradictory, to finish with a successful research question we've got to stop and smell the roses! In the research process we call this conducting background research. This will help you learn more about the scope of your topic and, will allow you to narrow your topic into a question.

A good research question is like having a good travel itinerary. It helps you define the boundaries of your research journey and makes sure that you don't get too far afield. Similar to taking a look at Trip Advisor, conducting background research involves consulting reliable sources like encyclopedias, literature reviews and known papers to show us what questions have been asked and what gaps exist in our area of study.

Lastly, don't be afraid to ask an expert! Your learning support librarians are here to help at every step of the journey.