

Refining Your Research Question

So, once you've got a general idea about your desired research destination, the next step is to refine your research question. This involves determining whether the question is too broad or too narrow, and whether the question has already been answered.

If a research question is too broad, then there will be a huge amount of information and studies that you couldn't possibly meaningfully address within the scope of your assignment. It's like saying you're going to see all of Europe in a week's vacation. If your question is too narrow, there will be little information for you to review and discuss in your assignment. This would be more like spending a month's vacation at the city park. Probably fun at first, but you'll run out of things to do pretty quickly.

Finally, have you ever been to a super popular tourist attraction, and it was so full of people that the experience was ruined? That's like picking a research question that has already been answered. The creativity and the originality of your work will be limited by the crowd of people already discussing the topic.

In general, useful research questions have the following characteristics: they concern a topic where there is some mystery, debate or controversy, they address how or why something happens and they inspire curiosity and imagination in the reader and the author.

Because there is no point going to an airplane museum if you aren't interested in the history of planes! Similarly, you don't want to pursue a research question that doesn't interest or motivate you. Rather you want to focus in on a question that will add value to your life or to your area of study. This will also make the research journey far more enjoyable!

As you set out on your journey, there are some tools available to help you choose your research question.

Concept mapping helps you explore a topic from every angle. It's a visual organization and representation of knowledge. You create a concept map by writing key words sometimes enclosed in shapes such as circles, boxes, triangles, and connecting the ideas that are related.

Journaling is like taking field notes of your travel. This is where you reflect and make connections between course concepts and the world while making note of what intrigues you.

Free writing is like wandering & observing your location without a particular destination in mind. You start writing and see what comes without a specific aim.

And finally, brainstorming is a bit like writing your travel bucket list: you think of as many topics and/or questions about your topic as possible and decide which is the best.

Just like when you go out in real life, during your research journey you will encounter detours, dead ends, and other unexpected events. That's all part of the adventure! Research is a process that involves reflecting and refining. It's perfectly normal for your research topic and question to change based on the background information and academic studies you find. Like any good traveler, a researcher's best tools are their adaptability and resourcefulness.

If you ever get lost, don't be afraid to ask for directions! Your learning support librarians are here to help at every step of the journey.