

## Developing Research Questions

### Things to Consider → Brainstorming → Evaluating Your Question(s)

*Developing a research question, like every other aspect of a research project—working with sources, the interpretation of data, the writing, the editing—takes work, and is a skill that you can practice, refine, and personalize. Here's a short primer on how to come up with a workable research question, references included. Whether you're just beginning, or already have a research question in mind, consider starting at the beginning of the worksheet and jotting down answers to each section.*

#### 1. Before you even have a topic... Things to Consider as You Develop a Research Question

- > What is the scope of the assignment/project (i.e. is this for a class, a thesis, a dissertation)?
- > How long do you have to complete this assignment, from question to final product?
- > What other assignment guidelines might inform your question (i.e. audience, length, purpose, genre)?

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#### 2a. Brainstorming: Topics and Academic Context

As you whittle your question out of a broader—general, directionless—topic, you should consider what remains unknown (to you) about your topic, and what aspects of the topic are (and have been) of interest to other scholars.

<i>Topic of interest</i>	<i>Scholarship on this topic</i>
How can this broad topic be divided into smaller (more manageable) sub-topics?	What are the major conversations/arguments about this topic? What's missing?
How do these different sub-topics relate to each other, both conceptually/thematically and in practice?	How has this topic been studied? What methods/methodologies/types of evidence have been utilized?

## 2b. Brainstorming: From Topics to Questions, Putting It Together<sup>1</sup>

*Take your topic and...*

> Ask about its **context (historical, geographical, social, etc.)**:

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> Ask how its parts **fit together as a system**:

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> Ask about its **own internal history**:

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> Ask how it can be **compared and contrasted with other, similar topics**:

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> Ask **whether it has to be the way that it is or not**:

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*Build on your sources and...*

> Ask questions that extend **arguments that you find persuasive**:

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> Ask questions that **evaluate existing claims using new evidence**:

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> Ask questions that reflect **your disagreement with a source**:

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## 3. Evaluate your Research Question

To refine your research question, work backwards from your imagined final project: *What would an answer to this research question actually look like?* Your eventual *thesis statement* should be SAFE<sup>2</sup> (Significant, Argumentative, Focused, and Evidence-based):

**Significant:** What would happen if this question was never asked/answered? What are the consequences (academic, social, practical, theoretical, etc.) of asking this question?

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**Argumentative:** Could your question facilitate different positions? Could researchers reasonably argue about how to interpret the data you are working with?

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**Focused:** What other themes does your question touch on? Could you further narrow your inquiry?

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**Evidence-based:** What kinds of data could you use to answer your question? How will you analyze that data?

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1 Questions adapted from Booth, W., Colomb, G., & Williams, J. (2008) *The Craft of Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 41-43; for examples of research question formats, see The University of Manchester Academic Phrasebank, <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>  
2 See: "The Thesis Statement," Harvey Mudd College, <http://pages.hmc.edu/alves/thesis.html>; and "Developing Strong Thesis Statements," Purdue Online Writing Lab, [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/establishing\\_arguments/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/establishing_arguments/index.html)