



How to Write a Good Research Question

Start by asking yourself questions about your RESEARCH TOPIC:

- ✓ **Am I genuinely curious about it? Will finding answers to my question matter to me? Do I feel strongly about it?**

If you are not interested in or genuinely care about this topic, it's unlikely your reader will be. It is **much harder** to write a paper on a topic that bores you.

- ✓ **Will I be able to find authoritative information to answer my questions?**

Evaluate if academics or organizations have likely done research on this topic or some aspect of it.

- ✓ **Will it challenge me to think more deeply?**

If you already know what you want to say, it is NOT a good topic because it wouldn't be real research. While many assume this will make their work easier, looking for sources to prove what you already know or assume will actually be harder than following where genuine research may take you and making discoveries along the way.

- ✓ **Will it force me to reflect on what I think?**

Asking "how" or "why" type questions about your topic usually leads to more interesting answers. Considering multiple facets of an issue or applying what you learn from one field to another may allow new insights or innovations to emerge.

A well-written research question will:

- Compel you to seek answers
- Help you to find direction for inquiry
- Narrow the scope to a manageable size
- Stimulate real thinking and analysis

What makes a good research question?

1. It is focused (not too big, not too small).

Example: What are the negative effects of smart phones?

This research question doesn't define the type of negative effects the writer will research—mental health? Negative social effects? Others? Also, *who* do smart phones negatively effect? Individuals? Society at large? If not specified, the scope is too large for a typical college paper.

Revision: What impact do smart phones have on intimate relationships?

The focus is now narrowed to effects on intimate relationships. Instead of assumed negative effects, the writer will collect data on all effects, positive or negative. The topic is now more manageable, the writer can concentrate on finding specific sources.

2. It is clear

You have defined your terms with enough specificity so that your audience knows how you will evaluate the data you gather.

Example: Why are social networking sites harmful?

It's not clear from this question what the harm might be or in what way it is harmful. The question also assumes that "harm" is already proven or accepted, but this may still be a matter of debate.

Revision: How are users aged 12-16 understanding the privacy concerns involved with Facebook and Twitter?

This revision clarifies **who** we are talking about (12- to 16-year-olds), **which** specific networking sites (Facebook and Twitter), and **what** the harm is (privacy). This question makes clearer the type of data that will be gathered and how it will be analyzed.

3. It is manageable in scope

When many additional questions arise, the scope is too wide. A paper that attempts to answer a question overly wide in scope would have to address too many issues and would be too lengthy for a college paper.

Example: Is college the best option for people?

What types of people? (Young, old, career-seeking, etc. or all of them?)

What other options besides college will be considered?

How is "best" defined--affordability, future job placement, meaningful or fulfilling work?

Revision: What impact would providing two years of free community college have on higher education?

The topic is narrowed to a more specific option—community college.

It specifically addresses a particular point regarding what makes college a good option: affordability. The scope of the question has been narrowed significantly and is more manageable to handle.

4. The answer *actually matters* to someone

Identify those who would benefit from the answers to your research question and how it may be relevant to them.

Example: Are internships good?

This is a very broad question without any clear direction. To whom might it matter whether internships are good or not? Perhaps the question hopes to uncover the ways in which internships can favor job seekers who are already financially stable, or those who already have family or social connections, but the question needs to be made more specific.

Revision: How can internships benefit job seekers outside of the financially privileged classes?

The revised question now identifies that internships may be impractical and unobtainable for people who need to support themselves with a paying job. The community of people who have an interest in the answer to this question has been identified.

5. It is interesting and raises questions for more research (no simple answers)

Example: Is Fast Food Bad for Your Health?

An answer to this question can be found fairly quickly with a simple Google search. There is not much debate about fast food being unhealthy, so a question that is too simple is boring!

Revision: How does the fast food industry influence American FDA nutrition and health standards?

This question identifies who might benefit (or not) from the research and defines "bad" as not meeting nutritional and health standards. The answers to this question would be more complex, require a good deal of research, consider multiple perspectives, and be more interesting to write and read.

Once you have a good research question, start your research at the LMC!

Librarians in the LMC (D-126) are available to assist you with finding information (books, articles, and videos), deciding if your information is credible and scholarly, and obtaining materials through interlibrary loan. You can drop in or call them during open hours at 425-564-6161, or do a live chat using [Ask a Librarian](#). When closed, you can email questions to reference@bellevuecollege.edu; the librarian the next open day will answer any overnight emails as soon as they get to work.