Creating a Research Question

The table below illustrates how a research question develops from a broad topic to a focused question. Follow the four examples down the columns to see how the questions develop. Then use the blank form provided below to develop your own research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Topic</th>
<th>Pollution</th>
<th>Substance Abuse</th>
<th>Marketing</th>
<th>Nutrition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restricted Topic</td>
<td>Acid Rain</td>
<td>Alcoholism</td>
<td>Nike and Marketing</td>
<td>Diets and nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowed Topic</td>
<td>Acid rain and water quality</td>
<td>Alcoholism and homelessness</td>
<td>Nike and international marketing</td>
<td>Vegetarianism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>What does acid rain do to drinking water supplies?</td>
<td>What issues need to be addressed to help homeless people deal with alcoholism?</td>
<td>What are Nike’s business practices in international sales?</td>
<td>How does a vegetarian diet maintain adequate nutrition?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now try out your topic idea below. It is useful to work out several variations of the topic idea to see how it could change slightly and be improved or amended.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Topic</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restricted Topic</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrowed Topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Question (why or how questions are best)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If you are having difficulty, try answering the following questions:

I am studying ________________________________

because I want to find out who/how/why ________________________________
in order to understand how/why/what ________________________________

So What Test!
Be sure to choose a topic worth arguing about or exploring. This means to construct a research question about a problem that is still debated, controversial, or up in the air. So arguing that drinking and driving is dangerous – while you could find a ton of evidence to support your view – would not be a very strong thesis or research question. We already know that drinking and driving are dangerous. Who would want to read something they already knew. You wouldn’t be persuading your reader of anything new.
### Framing Your Topic or Question

What was the unemployment rate last year?  
How does government spending on education in Hawaii affect the annual unemployment rate?

- Is NOT a Research Problem  
- Is a research problem because it asks about a relationship of two variables

Variable #1: public education expenditures in Hawaii  
Variable #2: annual unemployment rate in Hawaii

### Defining Your Topic

**Starting Point:** You are thinking of doing a paper on climate change

**General Topic:** Global warming

**Time Span:** past 50 years

**Place:** Pacific Island nations

**Event or Aspects:** changes in weather patterns; changes in cycles of weather events such as cyclones; effect on agriculture, marine life; ocean warming

**Narrowed Research Question:** How have Pacific island countries been impacted by climate change?

### Search Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Concept</th>
<th>Second Concept</th>
<th>Third Concept</th>
<th>Fourth Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Climate change greenhouse effect carbon emissions</td>
<td>Melanesia Micronesia Polynesia Pacific countries Individual country names</td>
<td>issue conflict confrontations struggle causes dilemma</td>
<td>solutions resources strategies problem-solving remedies avoidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using your research question from the first page, what are two variables you can examine?

Variable #1: ____________________________________________
Variable #2: ____________________________________________

The variables can be phrased in relation to each other, typically in one of the following ways:

What is the effect (variable #1) on (variable #2)?
What is the role of (variable #1) in (variable #2)?
How has the use of (variable #1) affected (variable #2)?
Why has (variable #1) led to (variable #2)?

* Consider Beginning your research question with the words How, Why, or What.
Research questions beginning with these words automatically suggest a somewhat broad investigation and substantive discussion, thus helping you avoid phrasing your topic too narrowly. Avoid starting your research question with the words Who, Where, or When. These words tend to force your research into a limited aspect of your subject and you'll be unable to come up with enough material for your project.

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**Defining Your Topic**

**General Topic:** ____________________________________________
**Time Span:** ____________________________________________
**Place:** ____________________________________________
**Event or Aspects:** ____________________________________________

**Narrowed Research Question:** ____________________________________________

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