

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.

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

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.

Broad Topic				
Restricted Topic				
Narrowed Topic				
Research Question (why or how questions are best)				

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?



Is NOT a Research Problem

How does government spending on education in Hawaii affect the annual unemployment rate?



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

First Concept

Climate change
greenhouse effect
carbon emissions

Second Concept

Melanesia
Micronesia
Polynesia
Pacific countries
Individual country names

Third Concept

issue
conflict
confrontations
struggle
causes
dilemma

Fourth Concept

solutions
resources
strategies
problem-solving
remedies
avoidance

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.

Defining Your Topic

General Topic: _____

Time Span: _____

Place: _____

Event or Aspects: _____

Narrowed Research Question: _____

Search Terms

First Concept

Second Concept

Third Concept

Fourth Concept