

# Developing a Research Question

Your research question guides your project from beginning to completion. Unlike your topic, which may be fairly general, your research question will define the specific scope of your project. In other words, the research question tells readers what you're trying to find out.

## DEVELOP YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

### 1. DEFINE THE TOPIC AREA

In a sentence or two, describe your broad topic or area of research. (Example: "Smoking cessation.")

### 2. DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

In a sentence or two, describe a problem that could be addressed in your topic or area of research. (Example: "Smokers often relapse because of complex physical and psychological factors.")

### 3. SPECIFY THE GAP & JUSTIFY THE INVESTIGATION

What is unknown or unresolved? Why should we bother investigating it? (Example: We don't know what combination of physical and psychological factors is most often associated with smoking relapse.)

### 4. CREATE THE RESEARCH QUESTION

(1) **Brainstorm as many questions as you can think of that relate to your research topic/problem/gap.**

Try starting questions with what, why, when, where, who, and how; in general, avoid questions that will result in only "yes" or "no" answers.

(2) **Draft a primary question:** Do you see one main question emerging from the list above? If not, try doing some additional reading or thinking, or talk to your supervisor or instructor (Example: How do the physiological and psychological effects of smoking make it difficult for young adults to quit smoking?)

(3) **Draft secondary research questions:** What information do you need to gather to answer your primary question? (Example: Before we can answer the question of "how" physiological and psychological effects make it difficult to quit smoking, we need to identify what the key effects are.)

## ASSESS & REFINE

**Evaluate your research question.** Ask yourself the following questions: will readers understand it on first reading? Is it feasible given your time and resources? Does it contribute to a wider academic conversation?

**Tighten your focus.** Look at every word in your question. Replace as many as you can with more specific language or ideas (e.g., instead of "students," say "Grade 9 students in Ontario").

**Talk it over.** Use this worksheet to talk with your supervisor or instructor about the scope and direction of your research plan.

**Revisit often!** Keep your research question in mind throughout the research and writing process.

You may find that you need to adapt your research question as you learn more.

# Developing a Research Question

## 1. DEFINE THE TOPIC AREA

In a sentence or two, describe your broad topic or area of research.

## 2. DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

In a sentence or two, describe a problem that would be addressed in your topic or area of research.

## 3. SPECIFY THE GAP & JUSTIFY THE INVESTIGATION

What is unknown or unresolved? Why should we bother investigating it?

## 4. CREATE THE RESEARCH QUESTION

**(1) Brainstorm as many questions as you can think of that relate to your research.**

**(2) Draft a primary question.** Do you see one main question emerging from the list above?

**(3) Draft secondary research questions.**  
What information do you need to gather to answer your primary question?