

Developing a Research Question

To develop an effective research question, it is essential that you're interested in the topic or care about the issue. If you are interested, you may know a bit about the topic, which can help you. For example, if you're assigned a research topic on an issue confronting the ancient Babylonian family, remember, by virtue of your own family life, you already know something about family issues. Once you determine what you know, then you're ready to do some general reading in a textbook or online in order to develop a usable research question (**Step 1**), one that will help you focus your research and your paper (unless, of course, your instructor gives you a very specific assignment).

Topic vs. Issue

To develop a coherent paper, it is important to focus on one major **topic** and **issue**. For example, "nuclear waste" is a topic, while "safe and economic disposal of nuclear waste" is an issue that can be discussed, debated, or disputed. An **issue** is a concept upon which you can take a stand.

How do you develop a usable research question?

Step 1: Consider what **topic** interests you, and why. What **issue** or problem related to that topic interests you, and why? What do you already know?

Step 2: Determine whether or not the topic or issue can be researched. By using key words related to your topic and issue, search Google Scholar or library data bases to see if there are enough credible, relevant sources for your project.

Step 3: List all of the questions that you'd like answered yourself. (See example below.)

Step 4: From your list, choose the question that is *focused*, neither too broad nor too narrow.

Step 5: Get feedback on your research question before beginning your research. For example, you may want to discuss your topic and issue with your instructor or with a RWC tutor.

Too Broad vs. Too Narrow

Sometimes the number of sources you find (**Step 2**) will help you discover whether your research question is too broad or too narrow. For example, researching a topic such as "juvenile delinquency" is difficult since there are hundreds of sources on all aspects of it. By asking questions about the topic (**Step 3**), we begin to narrow it down to an issue that can be covered more fully and in more depth. Once you complete your list of questions, choose one that is neither too broad nor too narrow (**Step 4**), as we do in the examples below.

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| a. <i>What is the 2012 rate of juvenile delinquency in Mississippi?</i> | Too narrow; it can be answered with a statistic. |
| b. <i>What can we do to reduce juvenile delinquency in Mississippi?</i> | Too broad; it implies that the researcher will cover all tactics for reducing juvenile delinquency. |
| c. <i>Does education play a role in reducing juvenile delinquents' return to crime?</i> | Focused enough to research in some depth and framed as an issue that will allow you to take a stand. |

Once you've chosen your research question, come to the RWC to get feedback.