

How to Define a Research Question

Overview

This document explains how to develop, refine, and evaluate a research question. A research question is the central question your essay or thesis aims to answer. It guides your literature search, determines your methodology, and keeps your writing focused.

Prerequisites

Before developing a research question, you must:

- Understand your assignment brief or thesis guidelines.
- Know the required length and deadline for your project.
- Have a general area of interest related to your field of study.

Why the Research Question Matters

A well-defined research question prevents you from being overwhelmed by search results. If you start searching for a broad topic like "sustainability," you will find millions of results. A precise question acts as a filter; it tells you exactly what information is relevant and what you can safely

ignore.

Step-by-Step Guide to Defining a Question

Step 1: Identify a Broad Topic

Begin with a general subject area that genuinely interests you and fits within your course requirements.

- *Example:* Fast fashion.

Step 2: Conduct Preliminary Background Reading

Read subject encyclopaedias, textbooks, or recent news articles to understand the current debates and key vocabulary in your topic area. Look for gaps, controversies, or recent developments.

- *Example reading outcome:* You notice that new European Union regulations are forcing changes in how clothing is manufactured and marketed.

Step 3: Narrow Your Scope

Broad topics are impossible to cover thoroughly in a single paper or thesis. Narrow your focus by applying specific limits:

- **Geography:** Limit your study to a specific country, region, or city (e.g., Germany, the European Union).
- **Demographics:** Focus on a specific age group, profession, or consumer type.
- **Timeframe:** Look at a specific decade or a recent event (e.g., post-2020).

- **Context:** View the topic through a specific theoretical lens or business function (e.g., marketing, supply chain management).

Understand Frameworks and Methodologies

Before you finalize your research question, you must decide **how** you are going to answer it. This means choosing a research framework and a methodology. Your question must match your method.

- **For Design Students (Architecture, Interior, Graphic):** Will you be conducting a precedent analysis, analyzing case studies, or doing practice-based research (research by design)? Your question needs to reflect this approach (e.g., investigating spatial relationships, user experience, or visual communication).
- **For Business Students:** Will your research be qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups) or quantitative (e.g., surveys, financial data analysis)?

New to these concepts? Before diving deeper into your topic, it is highly recommended to understand these foundational academic terms. Learn more in our short guides: [What is a Research Framework?](#) and [What is Research Methodology?](#)

Step 4: Draft the Question

Formulate your narrowed topic into a clear, open-ended question. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no". Instead, start your question with "how", "why", or "to what extent".

- *Draft question:* How do recent European Union supply chain regulations impact the marketing strategies of fast fashion retailers in Germany?

Step 5: Evaluate Your Question

Test your drafted question against three criteria:

1. **Is it clear?** The reader should understand exactly what you are investigating without needing additional explanation.
2. **Is it focused?** The scope must be narrow enough to answer thoroughly within your word count.
3. **Is it complex?** The question should require research, analysis, and synthesis to answer, rather than a quick Google search.

Using Generative AI for Brainstorming

Generative AI tools (like ChatGPT or Claude) are highly effective for the early stages of topic development. You can use them as a sounding board to break a broad topic into narrower angles.

Example Prompt:

“I have to write a bachelor thesis in business administration. I am interested in fast fashion and sustainability. Suggest ten specific, researchable angles focusing on the European market.”

Important: AI tools are for brainstorming only. They frequently invent facts, citations, and authors (hallucinations). You must verify all claims and concepts through academic library databases before committing to a topic. See our full guide on [Making the most of Generative AI](#).

Troubleshooting Common Pitfalls

Problem	Symptoms	How to Fix It
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Too broad	Your search returns hundreds of thousands of results. Your question could fill three books.	Add geographic, demographic, or temporal constraints. Focus on a single variable or relationship.
Too narrow	You cannot find any academic literature on the topic.	Broaden the geographic scope (e.g., expand from Berlin to Germany, or Germany to the EU). Choose a slightly broader demographic.
Yes/No format	The question can be answered with a single word (e.g., "Does marketing affect sales?").	Change the phrasing to explore mechanisms or degrees. Use "How does..." or "To what extent does..."
Assumptio n-based	The question assumes a conclusion before the research begins (e.g., "Why is greenwashing the only way fast fashion brands survive?").	Adopt a neutral stance. Rephrase to allow the data to dictate the conclusion (e.g., "How do fast fashion brands utilise greenwashing in their public relations?").

Next Steps

Once you have a working research question, you are ready to identify the keywords and concepts needed to search the library catalogue and academic databases.

Continue to: [Gathering background information](#)

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