

Discussion: Developing a Research Question

Anyone can ask a question, but how do you develop a usable research question? When conducting research it's absolutely essential to develop a research question that you're interested in or care about in order to focus your research and your paper (unless, of course, your instructor gives you a very specific assignment). For example, researching a broad topic such as "business management" is difficult since there may be hundreds of sources on all aspects of business management. On the other hand, a focused question such as "What are the pros and cons of Japanese management style?" is easier to research and can be covered more fully and in more depth.

The first step to developing a usable research question is to choose an appropriate topic or issue for your research, one that actually can be researched. Next you should list all the questions that you'd like answered yourself, and choose the best question. The best question is one that is clear, focused, and complex. Sometimes the number of sources you find will help you discover whether your research is too broad, too narrow, or okay. For example, if you choose juvenile delinquency (a topic that can be researched), you might ask the following questions:

- What is the 1994 rate of juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?
- What can we do to reduce juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?
- Does education play a role in reducing juveniles' return to crime?

If you know a lot about the topic, you can develop a research question based on your own knowledge. If you feel you don't know much about the topic, think again. 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 a great deal about family issues. Once you determine what you do know, then you're ready to do some general reading in a textbook or encyclopedia in order to develop a usable research question.

Exercise 1: Can the Topic Be Researched?

1. Do/do not the economies that result from a trash-burning plant outweigh the environment costs?
2. Is sexual orientation a result of nature (physically based) or nurture (social-culturally based)?
3. Does McDonald's or Burger King make a better burger?
4. Is Prozac a good treatment for clinical depression in certain cases?
5. Is there a link between hours of television viewing and violent behavior?

Exercise 2: Is the Question Too Broad or Too Narrow?

1.
 - a. What marketing strategies does the Coca-Cola Company currently apply?
 - b. What is the Coca-Cola Company's future marketing plan?
 - c. What marketing strategies has the Coca-Cola Company used in the past?
2.
 - a. What impact has deregulation had on the airline industry?
 - b. What percentage of commercial airline crashes was traced to negligent maintenance during the 10 years immediately preceding and following deregulation?
 - c. What impact has deregulation had on commercial airline safety?
3.
 - a. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more developed skills?
 - b. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more highly developed language skills?
 - c. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with larger vocabularies?
4.
 - a. What are the 14 different disease-causing genes that were discovered in 1994?
 - b. What is the importance of genetic research in our lives?
 - c. How might the discovery of a genetic basis for obesity change the way in which we treat obese persons, both medically and socially?