

Formulating Your Research Question (RQ)

In a **research paper**, the emphasis is on generating a unique question and then synthesizing diverse sources into a coherent essay that supports *your* argument about the topic. In other words, you integrate information from publications with *your* own thoughts in order to formulate an argument. Your topic is your starting place: from here, you will develop an engaging research question. Merely presenting a topic in the form of a question does not transform it into a good research question. For example:

RESEARCH TOPIC

BROAD

“What forces affect race relations in America?”

Likewise, the question “What is the percentage of racial minorities holding management positions in corporate offices in Nashville?” is much too specific and would yield, at best, a statistic that could become part of a larger argument.

NEUTRAL

“How does KFC market its low-fat food offerings?”

The latter question is somewhat better, since it may lead you to take a stance or formulate an argument about consumer awareness or benefit.

OBJECTIVE (factual)

“How much time do youth between the ages of 10 and 15 spend playing video games?”

The first question is likely to lead to some data, though not necessarily to an argument or issue. The second question is somewhat better, since it might lead you to formulate an argument for or against time spent playing video games.

OPEN-ENDED IDEA

“Does the author of this text use allusion?”

The second question gives focus by putting the use of allusion into the specific context of a question about the author’s political commitments and perhaps also about the circumstances under which the text was produced.

RESEARCH QUESTION

NARROWER

“How do corporate hiring practices affect race relations in Nashville?”

MAY YIELD an ARGUMENT or POSITION

“Does KFC put more money into marketing its high-fat food offerings than its lower-fat ones?”

SUBJECTIVE (an issue about which you can take a side)

“What are the effects of video-gaming on the attention spans of youth between the ages of 10 and 15?”

GIVES DIRECTION TO RESEARCH

“Does the ironic use of allusion in this text reveal anything about the author’s unwillingness to divulge his political commitments?”

Research Question Checklist:

- Is my RQ something that I am curious about and that others might care about? Does it present an issue on which I can take a stand?
- Does my RQ put a new spin on an old issue, or does it try to solve a problem?
- Is my RQ too broad, too narrow, or OK?
- Is my RQ researchable...
 - o ...within the time frame of the assignment?
 - o ...given the resources available at my location?
- Is my RQ measurable? What type of information do I need? Can I find actual data to support or contradict a position?
- What sources will have the type of information that I need to answer my RQ (journals, books, internet resources, government documents, interviews with people)?

The answer to a good research question will often be the THESIS of your research paper! And the results of your research may not always be what you expected them to be. Not only is this ok, it can be an indication that you are doing careful work!

Adapted from an online tutorial at Empire State College: <http://www.esc.edu/btm/pages/writerold/menus.btm#develop>