**Pre-Writing, Part 4: Identifying a Research Question**

Purpose: These questions will help you identify a research question for your proposal. A research question is a focused, specific question that you are attempting to answer through the exploration of your research. Unlike other forms of writing, which ask you only to take a stance or make an argument, research-heavy writing such as a research paper, proposal, thesis or dissertation is more interested in the question *first*. This model of writing helps you discover problems in your field that you might not know about, make connections between topics you would have thought could not have been connected, and, hopefully, discover a deeper, more developed topic, even if you already have one.

What are the elements of a great research question?

- It needs to be researchable and specific—which means that it cannot be too broad.
  - "Why do so many people drink soda?" is too broad. It does not consider a specific population, area, time period, and there is no indication *why* this question needs to be answer. Who is the academic or professional audience for this question?
  - Try: "How has increased commercial advertisement for specific brands of soda contributed to increased soda consumption in the southern United States?"
- It is relevant and interesting to an established audience—so the scope can't be too narrow.
  - "How many teenage inmates accused of arson in Wisconsin have read the works of Keats and what has it done for their social development after release?" is probably too narrow. Would answering this question contribute to a specific academic field? What good would having an answer to this question serve?
  - Try: "What impact has classic literature had on the social development of inmates in specific facilities?"
- It needs to be complex *enough*—usually involving a mix of specific considerations without being overwhelming. It has to be something that *you* would be willing to write dozens of pages about.
- It needs to be flexible—many writers start with an idea in mind that they believe that they would like to research and discover later that there is less information on the topic, less viability, or less interest in the information being gathered. Beginning writers should be willing to change focus.

Irene Clark, who frequently writes about writing and higher education, suggests that a good method for considering questions for research is to consider the purpose of a problem or question (46). **Another way to think about this is that you should be thinking about why you're looking at a particular question.** Now that you have some details about what a research question looks like, here is a list of questions that may help guide your process when developing a question of your own.

- Fine: What is the relationship between X and Y?
  - More specific: Why does X have such a big effect on Y? What does the relationship between X and Y say about Z? How has the relationship between X and Y changed, why, and how will it continue to change?
- Fine: How can we compare and contrast X and Y?
  - More specific: How have other researchers compared and contrasted X and Y previously? What


Works Cited: Clark, Irene. *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation.* Prentice Hall/Pearson Education, 2007.

common misconceptions about the similarities and differences between X and Y do I wish to challenge? What have researchers overlooked about X because of its comparisons to Y?


Works Cited: Clark, Irene. *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation.* Prentice Hall/Pearson Education, 2007.