

Introduction to Research: Start with a Question

[First Year Seminar](#) by Kristina Graham; Rena Grossman; Emma Handte; Christine Marks; Ian McDermott; Ellen Quish; Preethi Radhakrishnan; and Allyson Sheffield is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

Instructor's note

Use with [Writing a Strong Research Question](#) activity. This text introduces research and discusses the elements of a strong research question versus a regular question, including examples.

Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Identify the elements of a strong research question vs. a regular question.
- Write a strong research question based on articulated steps.

References, Licenses, and Attributions

[Library Workbook for English 110: A Topic-Based Approach](#) by Queens College Library is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

Introduction to Research: Start with a Question

College level research requires you to be especially responsible for how you find and share information. You will need to go beyond superficial googling and learn how to identify and report on what sources you find.

What is a Research Question?

Research is an attempt to give an original answer to a question you develop (or one that's assigned to you). In college writing, an important part of research is consulting what others before you have said about your topic. When you "cite" or refer to other writers, you are taking part in a conversation with other scholars. You incorporate their ideas into your writing by pointing out where you draw on others' work, and where you differ. In this way, research is essential to building your own arguments in the service of answering your research question.

Developing a research question is an excellent first step in the research process and it will help you to organize and focus your ideas on a topic. Developing a specific research question can be challenging. The less you know about a topic, the broader your initial question is likely to be—and you may not realize that your question is not yet specific enough to be useful in research. As you do research, you will have other, more specific questions to choose from. That's why we talk about developing a research question. It's an ongoing process, and you can expect your question to change more than once.

Regular Questions vs. Research Questions?

Most of us ask questions and seek answers every day. Are research questions any different from most of the regular questions we ask? Yes.

Generally, our everyday questions have quick answers. For example, you could easily find the answers to these questions:

What time does the grocery store open?

What other movies has that actor been in?

Even questions that seem more academic, if they can be answered definitively using a single source, don't make great research questions. For example, how many languages are spoken in Jackson Heights, Queens? It might take some time to find the answer, but that doesn't make it a great research question. A good research question asks how or why. In this case, a stronger research question might ask, how have the languages spoken in Jackson Heights, Queens, changed over time, and what factors drove that change?

From Broad to Narrow

Research questions are more specific than the general questions we answer every day. Here are some examples:

Regular Question: What can I do about my insomnia?

Research Question: How do flights more than 16 hours long affect the reflexes of commercial jet pilots?

Regular Question: How many children in the U.S. have allergies?

Research Question: How does poverty affect a child's chances of developing asthma?

Developing a specific research question can be challenging. The less you know about a topic, the broader your initial question is likely to be—and you may not realize that your question is not yet specific enough to be useful in research. As you do research, you will have other, more specific questions to choose from. That's why we talk about developing a research question. It's an ongoing process, and you can expect your question to change more than once.

The steps for developing a research question, listed below and included in the [video](#), can help you organize your thoughts.

- Step 1: Pick a topic (or consider the one assigned to you).
- Step 2: Write a narrower/smaller topic that is related to the first.
- Step 3: List some potential questions that could logically be asked in relation to the narrow topic.
- Step 4: Pick the question that you are most interested in.
- Step 5: Change that question you're interested in so that it is more focused.

Research Question Steps	Examples
Step 1: Pick a topic (or consider the one assigned to you).	Immigration
Step 2: Write a narrower/smaller topic that is related to the first.	Immigration to New York City
Step 3: List some potential questions that could logically be asked in relation to the narrow topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many immigrants live in New York City? • What countries do people immigrate from to New York City? • What are the work requirements for recent immigrants to New York City?
Step 4: Pick the question that you are most interested in.	What countries do people immigrate from to New York City?
Step 5: Change that question you're interested in so that it is more focused.	How have immigration trends

When it comes down to it, three key practices are involved in developing a research question:

- Imagining narrower topics about a larger one,
- Thinking of questions that stem from a narrow topic
- Focusing questions to eliminate their vagueness

As you practice coming up with research questions, remember that a strong research question:

- Addresses a **specific and credible observation**

- Connects to at least one **specific conversation**
- Uses specific **key terms**
- Is **open-ended** (i.e. there is a range of possible answers)
- Is **answerable**