

## Writing a Strong Research Question Sequence

Modified from Baruch College's First Year Seminar (FYS 1000) Facilitator's Guide Fall 2023 [CC BY 4.0](#)

### Instructor's note

Students read about the purpose of research in the ["Introduction to Research"](#) text, examine examples of strong research questions, practice writing their own research questions, and then apply the process to their own topic of interest.

- [Session One: Introduction to Research and Research Questions](#)
- [Session Two: Developing a Line of Inquiry](#)

### Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Generate and refine their own lines of inquiry based on personal interests and curiosities;
- Identify and describe the role of research in college, and
- Describe the benefits of engaging in academic research.

## Introduction to Research and Research Questions

### Preparation

Materials needed:

- [Introduction to Research and a Strong Research Question](#) text
- [Writing a Strong Research Question](#) worksheet
- [Social Media & Addiction | Zicklin](#) video
- [Food Insecurity in Developing Countries | Marx](#) video

### Warm Up

Share the example response below or share your own example response. Then, have students free-write in response to the prompt.

#### Example Response to Prompt

"I am interested in...."

- a. the history of amusement parks
- b. the mysteries of train traffic on the NYC subway
- c. the impact of climate change on NYC commuting patterns
- d. the relationship between students' sense of belonging and academic outcomes
- e. the legacy of Serena Williams

#### Prompt

"I am interested in...."

- a. the history of \_\_\_\_\_
- b. the mysteries of \_\_\_\_\_
- c. the impact of \_\_\_\_\_
- d. the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_
- e. the legacy of \_\_\_\_\_

### Read and Discuss Intro to Research Text

1. Ask students to read [“Introduction to Research: Start with a Question”](#) text and answer questions based on the text with the [Writing a Strong Research Question](#) worksheet.
2. Ask students to pair up to discuss their answers, then ask for volunteers to share their new research questions with the class. Review student-written research questions and as a class determine whether or not they meet the criteria of a good question.

## Developing a Line of Inquiry

### Refine Research Question and Develop Line of Inquiry

1. Explain that students will now write a research question based on a topic they are interested in knowing more about.
2. Ask students to pick one sentence from their free write from the previous day and brainstorm three questions you have about that topic based on the Research Questions Steps.
  - 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.
3. Invite students to share one question they developed with a partner and have the partner check if the question meets the research question criteria; if not, they should offer some constructive feedback.
4. After students share, ask for volunteers to share their questions and explain why they are interested in these questions.
5. Explain to students that this activity helped them to begin developing a line of inquiry, which is essentially the starting point of an academic research project or paper. A line of inquiry refers to a particular aspect or question that a researcher wishes to investigate in a particular field of study. In essence, a line of inquiry serves as the foundation or guiding principle for an academic research project or paper and helps researchers focus their efforts and determine the scope of their research.
6. Note: If time, have students continue this line of inquiry by introducing them to [academic databases](#) and asking them to begin researching this topic by creating a Works Cited page or presentation about this topic.

## The Role of Research in College

1. Explain the role of research in colleges:

Professors who engage in academic research are often at the forefront of their fields. This means that they are knowledgeable about the latest developments, trends, and best practices in their areas of expertise. By learning from professors who are active researchers, students can gain access to cutting-edge knowledge and insights that are not typically found in textbooks or other resources. Research also creates a habit of mind that causes one to question everything and search for answers to novel questions.

2. Show a couple of video examples of Faculty Research at CUNY. Here's a couple of examples from Baruch College:
  - a. [Social Media & Addiction | Zicklin](#)
  - b. [Food Insecurity in Developing Countries | Marx](#)
3. Ask students to discuss the following question in pairs: In each of these examples, how was research used in this field?
4. Explain to students that research is not just for the faculty. As college students, you will begin thinking about the questions that you're curious about in the fields that you are studying and ways you can begin to learn more.

## References, Licenses, and Attributions

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[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 and a Strong Research 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
<b>Step 1:</b> Pick a topic (or consider the one assigned to you).	Immigration
<b>Step 2:</b> Write a narrower/smaller topic that is related to the first.	Immigration to New York City
<b>Step 3:</b> List some potential questions that could logically be asked in relation to the narrow topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many immigrants live in New York City?</li> <li>• What countries do people immigrate from to New York City?</li> <li>• What are the work requirements for recent immigrants to New York City?</li> </ul>
<b>Step 4:</b> Pick the question that you are most interested in.	What countries do people immigrate from to New York City?
<b>Step 5:</b> 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**

## Understanding Research Questions

1. How would you define a good research question?
2. Decide whether each of the following questions would be a strong research question based on the criteria listed in [Introduction to Research Reading](#). Explain why it would be a strong question or how to make it stronger.

Question	Is this a strong research question? Why or Why not?
How many students study Humanities at CUNY schools?	
How does attending a strong nursing program at CUNY school affect students' future careers in the field of nursing?	
How does poverty affect a person's chance of developing a mental illness?	
What can I do to be more prepared for college?	

3. Rewrite the regular questions into stronger research questions:

Regular Questions	Research Questions
Where was my shirt manufactured?	

Where is the nearest community garden?	
How many bicycles were sold in New York in the past year?	