

# Getting Your PhD

## Formulating a Research Question

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Book Title: Getting Your PhD  
Chapter Title: "Formulating a Research Question"  
Pub. Date: 2007  
Access Date: October 14, 2013  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Ltd.  
City: London  
Print ISBN: 9781412919937  
Online ISBN: 9781849209229  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209229.n2>  
Print pages: 22-33

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209229.n2>

## Formulating a Research Question

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### What this Chapter Includes:

## Moving from the initial research proposal towards a formulated research question

Chapter 1 considered a variety of routes into, and motivations for, doctoral research. Another difference at the outset of your research can be the degree of autonomy you have in devising your focal research questions and the degree of prior research undertaken in your doctoral research area. You may have become familiar with, and deeply interested in, your research area over many years of undergraduate and postgraduate education, gaining funding from a research council. Alternatively, you may be undertaking a PhD as part of a wider research project. Here, you may have less autonomy in devising your focal research questions and be accountable to an external funder as well as your university. You may also be undertaking doctoral research that involves venturing into new research areas compared with your previous academic interests. However, across this spectrum of circumstances, the beginning of your doctoral research is likely to involve a period of immersion and focusing as you move from a research title and general proposal to a set of formulated, coherent and do-able research questions. Even within studies that have been commissioned by outside agencies or designed prior to your involvement, it is likely you will need to spend time understanding the wider context of your team project and [p. 23 ↓ ] refining your focal PhD research questions. This period has been described as a period of 'reducing uncertainty' (Phillips and Pugh, 2005), 'progressive focusing' (Arksey and Knight, 1999) and 'generating an appropriate and coherent research problem' (Punch, 2000). This initial stage combines excitement when beginning your project, uncertainty in getting to

know a new area or taking your knowledge to a more critical level as well as learning the skills and process of 'research problem formulation'. Focusing towards a coherent and do-able research problem that contributes to the building of knowledge in your area is a challenging task. John Roberts was interested in the general topic of 'free speech in public spaces' but found the task of focusing his research 'one of the most daunting tasks he faced' during his PhD research. We hope you can retain your enthusiasm and interest in your research topic while persevering and selectively focusing down your study appropriately for doctoral research.

The need to focus your research and generate a coherent research problem cannot be stressed enough. Central research questions, hypothesis or problems give your research activities purpose and direction, linking your research to an ongoing debate and/or body of knowledge. Without an explicitly formulated and worked through purpose or focus (or at least a preliminary one) your research project is likely to get steered in all sorts of directions. Without a formulated and feasible set of questions you risk:

Research questions do not often appear in a sudden brain-wave! Rather, they are generated through a process of engaging with your research topic or interests (which may of course lead to some brain-wave ideas). This engagement can involve analysing and thinking about previous work in your area or undertaking a period of initial data collection. The former approach involves deductively generating research questions as you are deducing some focal questions from thinking about existing empirical and theoretical developments in your research area and identifying the gaps, ambiguities and inconsistencies within previous work. The latter approach involves inductively generating research questions from a period of data collection — looking afresh at a research topic or social phenomena. Many studies in practice involve a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches (see Blaikie, 2000). Research questions are therefore 'formulated' through an ongoing process of engagement with your research interests, setting and/or prior research.

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# Distinguishing between research title, research area, general and focal research questions

What is a 'formulated' research question? Drawing on her own research and supervisory background, Gina Wisker advises students to distinguish between the research title, focal area and key research questions (also see Phillips and Pugh, 2005; Punch, 2000). Problems arise if students persist in thinking that their doctoral research title and general research area also convey their research questions, as the latter are much more focused and specific. Gina illustrates the role of these different aspects of your research proposal:

The chapter now turns to some strategies that may help you to comprehensively formulate your research area, title and questions.

## Gaining an overview of the literature and research

Gaining an overview of the theoretical and empirical debates in your research area will generate an understanding of previous research and dominant approaches. Whether you are inductively or deductively generating your focal research questions, getting to know previous research in your area will help you to identify gaps in [p. 25 ↓] prevailing knowledge. In the early stages of her doctoral research, Harriet Churchill spent much time 'immersing herself in the literature'. Her supervisors had advised her to read around her research area and identify some 'gaps in knowledge'. In hindsight, Harriet felt it took her a year or so to demystify this process. Later on in the research process, Harriet developed strategies that aid thinking about previous knowledge via gaining an overview of a research area. These consisted of identifying seminal works and literature overviews, thinking about the research approaches and questions that have been

developed, devising ways of presenting research and popular debates using diagrams or charts and asking her supervisors about key empirical and theoretical contributions.

## BOX 2.1 Gaining an overview of the literature relevant to your research area

**Ask yourself:**

**Strategies for gaining an overview may include:**

Sonali Shah was faced with the need to re-design her doctoral study once she discovered her initial proposal was not original or appropriate, a process that involved much uncertainty and anxiety:

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The direction of my research changed somewhat after a literature search. I realised that my original research topic had been investigated before, I would not be adding anything new to knowledge. This led to fear about what my research would be. It was a combination of my supervisor lending me a book and thinking about the gaps in the research done in my area that prompted my final PhD direction. I reformulated my research questions around a study on investigating what influences career development and success for disabled people. I was very enthusiastic about this, especially since much of the existing research in relation to the employment of disabled people tended to focus either on their under-employment or unemployment. I was encouraged that I would definitely be contributing something new to knowledge.

Sonali demonstrates a systematic approach to devising her research questions. The process of engaging with the previous research in her area led her to abandon her initial research area. However, with persistence, critical thinking and support from her supervisor, she was able then to identify a fruitful gap in existing knowledge which provided the basis for an alternative research design.

# Generating research questions from a period of data collection

An inductive approach to formulating your general and focal research questions can involve focusing one's questions after an initial period of fieldwork (Mason, 2002). Some qualitative ethnographic approaches, for example, aim to generate questions following a period of 'immersion' in the research setting. The aim is to link your questions more to the prominent issues and themes arising from the research setting or lived experience rather than from prior academic research knowledge, popular social representations or even the researcher's own preconceptions (see Atkinson et al., 2001; Crang and Cook, 2006; Mason, 2002 for ethnographic approaches). However, make sure you have a clear rationale and timeframe for preliminary fieldwork. Several of our contributors noted the complexity of managing this phase and approach. They discussed the need to be quite strict on the time allowed for this initial period of 'exploration' and quite disciplined in ensuring they did go on to focus their research in specific ways. Part of the problem could be that you need to think further about what is required and feasible for doctoral research. The next four sections consider prominent issues in research question formulation: quantitative research questions; questions that are too vague; questions that are too restrictive; feasibility issues and 'originality'.

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## Common issues in research question formulation

### Thinking quantitatively

Whether your intended research project will use qualitative or quantitative research methods, or a mixed approach, the process of finalising a set of research questions is similar. Quantitative approaches, however, are suited to asking particular questions

leading to the generation of quantitative data and the analysis of such data. Blaikie (2003: 11) describes the process as follows:

## Is your question too vague?

Having a research question that is excessively broad or too vague is a common problem among doctoral students. Often this situation merely means that further 'progressive focusing' needs to occur. There needs to be further thinking through of vague questions to turn them into more focused ones. Gina Wisker, Harriet Churchill and John Roberts all felt that, on reflection, their PhD research questions remained too vague for too long. Working with vague questions led them to amass a huge amount of data, some of which they did not have time to analyse. It took Gina eighteen months to arrive at a 'formulated research question'. Harriet and John undertook some field-work before they focused their research questions. Harriet felt that, in hindsight, her research could have been more focused in the initial stages. In practice, Harriet focused her research quite a lot during the data analysis and writing up stages:

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The research, looking at lone mothers' experiences of caring and providing for children at a time of national policy change in supporting parenting and parental employment, could have been enhanced by a more focused approach earlier on. There were many facets to the final thesis – some of which I could have focused on more – such as professional discourses on parents' support needs, mothers' concerns around parenting, mothers' strategies for financially providing for their children and so on. Having quite broad research questions meant that a lot of 'focusing the research' actually occurred in data analysis and writing phases – however by then I was already restricted by the data I had and lacked the time to focus in some of the directions I wanted to (because this would have required more data collection). Overall, though, by the end of my thesis I had a much more comprehensive picture of the research area, and now I feel more able to generate focused research questions.

John Roberts also took the approach of 'letting a focus emerge' from his field-work. However, a problem for John was that he gathered a lot of data covering a broad

theoretical focus, which he did not have the time to analyse within his doctoral research. Some of his data did alternatively provide useful material, though, for subsequent publications and research:

My original research title was to conduct an ethnographic study of Speaker's Corner. I aimed to immerse myself in its everyday activities in order to understand the various social processes and relationships (i.e. how the audience, speakers and policy behave) that contribute towards, and help reproduce, its identity as a place for free speech. So I entered the research field with a vague idea. However, this had not yet been formulated into one definable research question. Two further turning points occurred. First, I stumbled over a brilliant social history book that described an earlier version of Hyde Park Corner speeches. I then set out to trace the history of public speaking at Hyde Park. Second, I discovered a whole wealth of historical information about the regulation of public speaking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at Hyde Park at Kew Public Records Office. Later on though only one area of data informed my thesis, the other areas informed subsequent journal articles.

## Is your research question too narrowly defined or restrictive?

At the other end of the spectrum is the problem of your questions being too restrictive. This is a problem whereby questions are too loaded with prior assumptions and common sense connections that explanatory capacity becomes restricted. As a supervisor, Gina Wisker often encourages students to 'unpack questions that are too narrowly **[p. 29 ↓ ]** defined' for the purpose of a PhD. Gina gives the example of a student seeking to establish 'How and why do girls fail in school?' This question begins with 'too many assumptions that have not been critically subjected to rigorous analysis':

This research question already gives the sense of a fore-grounded conclusion – that girls fail in school – thus the question from the outset rejects a body of contradictory evidence and closes off explanatory avenues. In this case the student needs to read more about this topic carefully to identify the debates in the area and a gap in knowledge rather than going over old ground. He needs to ask more open questions of



the research area and population rather than prejudging and so narrowing responses and interactions into a pre-determined focus.

In this case, Gina facilitated a critical analysis of the literature and research in the area by helping her student to devise 'a kind of matrix to describe and evaluate the ways in which previous authors were exploring and engaging with the issues'. Then 'from this analysis of previous research we generated an appropriate research question' — one that 'goes beyond an initial exploratory statement' and one that gets to the 'heart of the work, the issues, the concerns — so that theories interrogate and scaffold the exploration and questioning'.

## BOX 2.2 Unpacking your research question

### Ask yourself:

## Is your question going to facilitate an original contribution to knowledge?

Harriet Churchill felt her PhD research suffered from a lack of focal research questions. Later on in her study she felt if she had focused her research more after some **[p. 30 ↓ ]** preliminary analysis of early interviews she could have generated a more 'original' research project. In the final data analysis stage, Harriet realised her initial interviews raised what could have been some more original lines of inquiry. However, Harriet reflects that changing her research question and following new leads in the early stages of her PhD felt like having to 'start again' or take a step backwards.

Making an original contribution to knowledge certainly can be a tough criterion to meet within doctoral research. However, originality is likely to emerge through the ongoing process of deeply engaging with an area of interest and your research activities. Gina Wisker describes how her PhD students often experience a 'learning leap' that occurs in the latter stages of generating a thesis. This 'learning leap' is where the 'real question or real contribution to knowledge emerges in the later stages of the thesis'. After this 'leap'

there is a kind of conceptual penny-drop phase that brings the thesis together and ‘work starts to be theorised and conceptualised in more complex and coherent ways’. The student begins to develop their capacities for making a contribution to understanding and knowledge in their subject area.

What is important is to try not to dwell on nor deny these ‘problems or concerns’ but to seek to establish whether your aims are too broad or vague or narrow and to seek ways to appropriately focus and justify your research. If you feel unsure of your focus, find it difficult to articulate or establish where your study fits into a wider picture of academic knowledge — then you will need to continue with the process of turning your ‘general enthusiasm’ for a subject into a ‘clearly defined research project’ guided by clearly formulated questions. The emphasis here is on the continual and active engagement on the part of the researcher with the issues of originality and prior knowledge — indicating that questions neither fall from the sky nor suddenly hit us in a moment of *Eureka!* clarity. Rather, they are formulated through a process of thinking about your research area, interests and design.

## Thinking about feasibility

Phillips and Pugh (2005) found that PhD students often under-estimate how much time and effort is required for each stage of the research process and for their overall project. Thinking about, and getting advice on, the ‘do-ability’ of your research project will be an important aspect of devising your research questions and approach.

### BOX 2.3 Thinking about feasibility

This is about linking the **aims of your project** with the **requirements of a PhD** and the **resources available** to you for your doctoral studies.

**Ask yourself:**

# The fit between your research questions and overall design

As you generate your general and focal research questions, you will also be thinking about your research design as a whole. In moving to your overall research design you will then need to specify the theoretical and methodological frameworks to your study. The main principles guiding your design are to ensure a consistent fit between your research questions, your methodological and theoretical approach and the resources and requirements for undertaking your PhD research. This consistency directly relates to producing a valid and effective research design. You need to ensure that you are able to fulfil the requirements for doctoral research and able to complete the study within the deadline required (Mason, 2002). The following two boxes identify some of the crucial considerations in research design. These issues are covered widely in the research methods literature and some useful resources are given below.

## BOX 2.4 Ontological and epistemological underpinnings to your research

In thinking about your general research area and what you wish to find out about – you will need to think about your underlying ontological and epistemological frameworks. Your **ontology** relates to what you are identifying as social reality and what we think social reality consists of. For example, are you wanting to examine decisions, identities, institutions, discourses or experiences? All of these concepts refer to different ‘things’ and you need to think about what you think these concepts represent. Think about:

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Your **epistemological** stance relates to how you conceptualise knowledge and your underlying theory of knowledge:

You are likely to return to these questions many times during your research! (see Blaikie, 2000; Mason, 2002).

## Key Points to Remember

### SUGGESTED READING

Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*. Malden: Polity Press.

Creswell, J.W. (2002) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*. London: Sage.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Punch, K.F. (2000) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. London: Sage.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2003) *Research Methods for Business Students*, 3rd edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209229.n2>