

# Encyclopedia of Research Design

## Research Question

Contributors: Richard Race  
Editors: Neil J. Salkind  
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One of the most important decisions a researcher will make is deciding on a question that will be examined in the research process. This can be a very difficult decision because there can be many questions a researcher wants and needs to address. Good supervision will guide a researcher to a focused area of study that can lead to a focal question. The debate continues on whether this focus should be singular or plural, and the decision can be influenced by the subject of study and various quantitative or qualitative methodologies employed. John Creswell has suggested that before searching the literature, a researcher should identify a topic, using such strategies as drafting a brief title or stating a central research question. Researchers need to be aware of the following issues in relation to creating the research question.

## Choosing the Right Research Question

Choosing the right research question involves a number of decisions that will shape both the research project and process. The “right” question has to involve several issues: an adequate knowledge of the area being considered for research, constructive support from a supervisor, and the time a researcher has to carry out the research. First, the researcher must have knowledge of the general and specific subject area. This knowledge may have been obtained from previous study; otherwise, research evidence from recent, published literature has to be examined. The researcher needs to realize that the research to be undertaken contributes to ongoing debates within a subject area being researched. Some students and academics do not realize that the rules and regulations that apply to senior researchers also apply to students and novice researchers at the undergraduate level (termed *junior researchers*). Literature reviews have to begin at the earliest possible stage of research because this knowledge has to inform the development of the research question. The first evidence base in research is published and edited literature, and the application of key and core texts within the subject has to inform the creation and evolution of the research question. This strategy suggests that the research question might have to change when a researcher acknowledges what has been published in a subject area.

A supervisor plays a crucial role in directing or nudging the researcher in the right direction. As Thomas Murray and Dale Brubaker suggest, it is well to identify potential

sources of help and to recognize the advantages and limitations of each. Those sources of most value are usually academic advisers, fellow graduate students, experts outside one's own department or institution, the researcher him- or herself, and the professional literature. The supervisor can advise which research direction a researcher can travel. This direction can be absolutely controlled if the researcher is working within a funded team, in which a supervisor can be a senior researcher. Relative control exists when a research supervisor informs the researcher about research design, which consists not only of devising the right question but also of literature review; methods and methodology, data collection, presentation, analysis, and answering the question in a research project conclusion. Third, time is an issue that has to be considered by all researchers when thinking how to answer a research question. On reflection, planning and organization are crucial techniques in research design, but time still shapes what can and what cannot be done. As Elizabeth Wilson and Dorothy Bedford have argued, What are the consequences for full- and part-time students and staff who have full-time responsibilities outside academia? Time is an issue that also concerns both the quality of research and supervision.

## Justifying the Research Question

Following these three issues, the researcher must justify which subject and question or hypothesis is going to be researched. Justification involves choice. Which decisions have to be made before a research project can begin? These choices involve how specific a subject area needs to become when addressing a problem. Which problem can be addressed when considering knowledge, supervision, and time? That narrowing down or becoming focused on a research area is possibly one of the most important processes involved within research because justifying the research project makes it not only viable but indeed possible. Focusing on a research area allows the next focal decision, which involves which question can be [p. 1262 ↓ ] asked and addressed. Even at this early stage, ethical issues need to be considered. For example, what happens when a research project involves participants age 16 or younger in a methodology? Which questions can be asked? What experiments can take place within a laboratory?

The type of research question needs to also be addressed. Patrick White divides question types into descriptive and explanatory, the W-questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how), and purpose-led typologies. The purpose issue also helps in finding that focus and reducing the number of questions or subquestions. This is subject oriented, and different subjects and disciplines have different methods in relation to these research choices. Justification of research question is both subject based and situational. For example, a dissertation needs to be focused within roughly a 6-month time frame. If time is longer, then the purpose can be multifocal, but a single research question may produce more focused results and recommendations for further research.

Richard Race

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*See also*

#### Further Readings

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