

Finding a good Research Question

Finding a research question is the first important step when writing a research paper or MA thesis and can be quite challenging. Therefore, the following will provide helpful tips and resources.

Type of Research Question

The type of question you can answer in your paper depends on what kind of paper you are writing. Shorter **essays** (1,200–2,400 words), for example, usually provide clear answers to a specific and narrowly defined question. The goal of a short essay is to demonstrate your own knowledge of a topic using a specific question or an example. A more comprehensive **seminar paper** (3,000–6,000 words) consists of a more in-depth engagement with a topic based on an original research question. It can also go into different aspects of the questions and sub-questions, illuminate the subject from different perspectives, or weigh different possible answers against each other. A seminar paper is based on more literature and material than an essay. A **master's thesis** (24,000 words or about 80 pages, 1.5 spaced) pursues a sociological research question, ideally with empirical data, using scientific research methods, and has a more complex structure and is wider in scope.

See also: <https://wikis.fu-berlin.de/display/ifs/Master%27s+Thesis>

Generating ideas for your question

There are several approaches to generating initial ideas for the question you want to address in your paper. The respective question always depends on the topic and is developed by thinking about an issue based on academic literature and your own considerations, which is then followed by the formulation of your own research interest.

Generally speaking, it is helpful to always write down your own ideas, questions, and thoughts during your courses and while reading texts.

Two strategies might be helpful when gathering the first ideas concerning your research question:

1. Clustering

Clustering is a writing strategy in which you create and visualize different associations based on a central word or phrase (can be a topic, question, or concept). In contrast to a mind map, clusters are meant to help you gather new ideas and draw new connections rather than organize your existing ones.

For more detailed instructions see:

https://www.stw.berlin/assets/sw-berlin/bereiche/beratung/Schreibzentrum/Lernmaterialien/Handout_Cluster_MindMap_EN.PDF

2. Freewriting

Freewriting, or automatic writing, is a strategy in which you try to write for a certain amount of time without taking a break and without correcting or censoring your thoughts. The basic idea is that you can develop new and unique ideas by muting your inner critic and writing down anything that comes to mind.

For more detailed instructions, see:

https://www.stw.berlin/assets/sw-berlin/bereiche/beratung/Schreibzentrum/Lernmaterialien/Handout_Freewriting.pdf

If an essay or term paper is to be written as part of a class and you have a hard time finding research questions, it might be helpful to go through the seminar literature and think about the following questions (which can also be the basis of your cluster or freewriting):

- What did I find particularly interesting?
- Where did I immediately find concrete examples?
- What do I still not quite understand?
- What annoyed me and why?
- What do I want to know more about?

Revising a Research Question

Once you have found a research question that you want to work on, the following checklist might help you revise and focus your research question.

1. Check: Is it one (and really just one) question?

If not:

- 1) Group (cluster/mindmap) questions according to subtopics and contexts.
- 2) Choose **one** question.

Do not look for an “all-encompassing” question (which you will not realistically be able to answer), but rather for a smaller sub-question that is located at a “dense” and interesting intersection of the cluster/mindmap. Use your knowledge of how this question relates to other questions to explain why the question is important. If other questions from the cluster are very important to you and you do not want to completely abandon them, consider pursuing them later in your studies.

For more questions that will help you pin formulate a concise research question, see: https://www.stw.berlin/assets/sw-berlin/bereiche/beratung/Schreibzentrum/Lernmaterialien/Handout_Approaching_a_Research_Question.pdf

2. Definition of Terms and Operationalization

You have to clarify the central terms of the research question before you start writing your paper.

Ask yourself: What exactly do you mean by the terms you use in the question?

3. Re-evaluation: Does the question suit your interest?

After finding one research question that will guide your research and figuring out what you actually mean by it, take a step back and think about whether you are actually interested in pursuing this question.

If not:

- 1) Brainstorm again (see above).
- 2) Sort the questions by level of interest or passion.

4. Check: Can I answer my research question?

4.1 Ask yourself: Can I answer my research question using the selected material and theory?

If not: What sub-question can I answer with the chosen material and theory? OR What other material/theory can I use to answer my question?

For additional information on how research questions, materials and theory are connected, see:

https://www.stw.berlin/assets/sw-berlin/bereiche/beratung/Schreibzentrum/Lernmaterialien/Handout_Cornerstones_final.pdf

4.2 Ask yourself: Can I realistically answer this question until the date that the essay or term paper has to be submitted?

If not: What sub-question will I be able to answer by the deadline? (Collect, cluster, and choose **one** question.)

For more information on how to narrow down your topic or research question, see:

https://www.stw.berlin/assets/sw-berlin/bereiche/beratung/Schreibzentrum/Lernmaterialien/Handout_Clarifying_Your_Topic.pdf

Revising your research question during the research or writing process

The question can also change and, above all, become more precise during the analysis and writing process, especially in longer papers. However, it is important to formulate a question guiding your literature research as early as possible to avoid losing track of what you are looking for. Your question should guide the literature search and not the other way around. Make sure you actually write down your question instead of just keeping it in mind.

Additional resources:

TWP Writing Studio: What Makes a Good Research Question?

<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/research-questions.original.pdf>

UC Merced Library: Think Like a Researcher: Instruction Resources: Research Question Discussion

https://libguides.ucmerced.edu/think_like_a_researcher/rq-getting-started

University Writing Center George Mason University - How to Write a Research Question

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/research-based-writing/how-to-write-a-research-question>