

The Research Question

Your research question is the most critical part of your research proposal—it defines the proposal, it guides your arguments and inquiry, and it provokes the interests of the reviewer. If your question does not work well, no matter how strong the rest of the proposal, the proposal is unlikely to be successful. Because of this, it is common to spend more time on the researching, conceptualizing and forming of each individual word of the research question than on any other part of the proposal.

To write a strong research question you will need time. Step away from your computer; consider what drew you to your topic. What about it animates and matters to you? Listen to yourself and start formulating your question by following your own interests. Remember, you will spend a lot of time researching and writing about the proposed project: if it does not interest you in the beginning, it will certainly become very difficult to write about in the end.

Next, extensively research your topic. What have people said about it? How have they framed their research? What gaps, contradictions, or concerns arise for you as you read, talk to people, and visit places?

After you have done this you can go back to your computer or note pad and start crafting the question itself. When you do, consider that a strong research question should be *evocative, relevant, clear, and researchable*.

The research question should be evocative.

Evocative questions are ones that catch the interest of the reviewer and draw her/him into the proposal. Equally important, they easily adhere in the reviewers' memory after reading the proposal. Questions tend to be evocative because of *the ways they engage with challenging topics*: they pose innovative approaches to the exploration of problems, and because of this the answers found are far from obvious. There is no single way to form a conceptually innovative question. However, some of the following qualities are common to successful proposals.

Make it timely. Evocative questions are often distilled from very contemporary social or theoretical concerns. For example, questions regarding the energy crisis, international tribunals, nationalism, or the rise of anti-globalization protests are likely to peak the interests of others because they are questions whose relevance will be clearly discernable for reviewer.

Frame it as a paradox. Frame your question around a provocative paradox. For example, why have indigenous organizations in Bolivia markedly declined while the number and quantity of funding sources has increased? Or why have violent conflicts over forest resources increased in the last ten years while the very people involved in these conflicts have become less and less dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods? There are many potential answers to these questions, and your research may ultimately challenge your own expected explanation—but this in itself is a relevant discovery. These types of paradoxes pull the reader into the proposal and set up a situation whereby the research will fill in a provocative piece of the puzzle and make clear a much-needed broader understanding.

Take a distinctive approach. Finally, a question that approaches an old problem in a refreshingly new way, or proposes a surprising angle of analysis on a difficult dilemma, is likely to prove evocative for reviewers. This could involve a new methodology, a new conceptual approach, or the linking of two previously disparate fields of knowledge. These innovative approaches both develop confidence in the

intellect of the researcher and hold promise for new understandings and insights to old and difficult questions.

The research question should be relevant.

Questions that clearly demonstrate their relevance to society, a social group, or scholarly literature and debates are likely to be given more weight by reviewers. Of course the relevance of a research question, not to mention the question of who finds it relevant, will vary widely according to the funding source. As a general rule, research is more likely to be funded if it is seen as *part of a larger intellectual project* or line of inquiry, not just a way for the researcher to get a degree. Below are two common ways to demonstrate this in your proposal.

Fill in the missing piece. If your proposal can lay out a given field or dilemma and then point to a specific portion that is *missing* in that field or dilemma—a gap which will be filled by the answer to your research question—your research is likely to garner a great deal of support. Reviewers will note its importance and recognize its relevance to a larger community of researchers.

Make connections. Even if you are working on a narrow topic or in a specific place, ask questions that help relate the research to broader trends, patterns, and contexts. Doing this will help show how funding a seemingly distinct research project helps fuel larger debates. For example, show how someone working in a small town in Outer Mongolia will help understand the broader process of post-Soviet economic transformations.

The research question should be clear.

Clear questions tend to be short, conceptually straightforward, and jargon-free. This does not mean they have to be overly simplistic; but save your theoretical gymnastics and abstract disciplinary language for the analysis. Work to keep your questions as lucid and simple as possible. This may be easier in some cases than in others, but some of the strongest and most theoretically sophisticated proposals we reviewed were framed by some of the simplest, most straightforward research questions. In contrast, the most complicated questions tended to appear in proposals where the researcher seemed more interested in demonstrating his/her theoretical knowledge than in engaging the research itself. Below are simple ways to keep your question clear.

Ground the questions. Keep your questions close to the topic or place you are researching. Questions that are too abstract or obtuse make it difficult for the reader to determine your question's relevance and intent. You must still link your question to a larger context, but ground that connection in temporal and spatial specifics.

Limit variables. If a question is burdened with too many variables or too many clauses it becomes both difficult to read and difficult to research. Here are two contrasting examples from the SSRC web site: a question like “Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies?” is much easier to understand than “Was the decline in population growth in Brazil related more to sex education, the distribution of birth control, or resource depletion?” You may talk about all these factors in your proposal, but the first question allows the reader to focus on the *central aspect* of your research rather than the variables surrounding it.

The research question should be researchable.

Research questions need to be clearly “doable.” One of the most common rationales for rejecting proposals is that the question is simply too expansive (or expensive) to be carried out by the applicant. There are many questions that you will need to ask yourself to avoid this pitfall. Above all else, **consider your limitations**. Many very practical questions need to be considered when choosing your research question. First among them is: How long will the research take to carry out? Next, do you have the appropriate background to carry out the research? Are there ethical constraints? Is the project likely to be approved by your advisor and your university’s committee for the protection of human subjects? Can you obtain the cooperation from all the necessary individuals, communities and institutions you need to answer the question you have asked? Are the costs of conducting the research more than you will be likely to raise? If I can’t complete this project well, can I break it down and address the most important component? Remember that writing a research question is an iterative process and such concerns need to be carefully considered in your research design and budget.