

## Strategies For Narrowing A Research Question

Developing a clear, focused research question can be challenging. A good research question should match the purpose for an assignment and provide a thesis statement or argument. These strategies can help you turn a mishmash of general information into a good research question.

What does a good research question look like? Research questions ask us to consider all the small questions and answers we find as part of a single problem. They usually are:

- ✓ Focused on a specific area of curiosity within the discipline or assignment
- ✓ Clear and precisely stated
- ✓ Not a topic, a fragment, a phrase, or a statement

**NOTE: Research questions should not be simple questions of fact that can be answered quickly.**

### Strategy One: Answer the simple questions

Freewriting with the following steps can quickly generate ideas for a research question.

1. List your interests as they pertain to your specific discipline or assignment.
2. Consider one of the items on your list. Jot down everything you know about the topic as quickly as you can (lists or paragraphs are equally useful).
3. Find the answers to the following questions, and add them to what you already have: "Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? So what?" and "What if?" These represent possible "gaps" in your knowledge; the last four are particularly tough because they are open-ended. Open-ended questions often lead to good research questions.
4. Continue steps 2 and 3 with each item on your initial list until you have found an open-ended question you would like to explore further.

### Strategy Two: Read to write

We often do not know what we are curious about until we read subjects that interest us. Go to the library. Search academic and professional websites. Talk with one of the research librarians. Look for more general information about the topic or discipline you are in.

After you have read, try doing Strategy One again! You may have found something more specific that you would like to explore.

### Strategy Three: Pick it apart

All speakers and writers use the same basic Rhetorical Modes to organize ideas. Asking questions about these can give you a research question with clear direction.

- Comparison & Contrast
- Cause & Effect
- Process
- Problem & Solution
- Classification or Division

Ask the same questions ("Why?" "How?" "So what?" "What if?") for each of these modes. Use those answers to look for ideas that you can arrange your interests around. What argument do you want to communicate? Using these tips will put you well on your way to developing a strong research question that will serve as your purpose for the assignment. The answer to your research question will eventually become your thesis or primary argument. Do not be alarmed if the process of selecting a research question changes the way you think; that is part of writing!