**FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION**

**AIMS:** This lecture is an introduction to the process of creating a research question in political studies. This is a crucial component of postgraduate studies, where students are expected to formulate their own questions for their essays as well as their theses.

The aims of this lecture are for students to:

* Understand the importance of a good research question.
* Understand the components of a good research question.
* Know how to begin the process of formulating a research question.
* Know what to avoid when formulating a question

# SECTION ONE: What is a research question?

A research question is the starting point for investigations in the natural and social sciences. It directs the phenomena that a study will be examining and seeking to explain.

A research question helps to focus one’s research. A successful paper depends to a large extent on the quality of the research question that has been set. Setting a focused and narrow question is a fundamental step towards writing a concise and well-structured paper. If your question is unclear or unanswerable, then your paper is set to be poor from the beginning. This means that it is important to engage meaningfully with the process of question setting. Remind students that the question that they set should be one that they are genuinely interested in exploring, since they will be spending a lot of time researching and writing about the topic that they elect.

# SECTION TWO: Starting the process

There is no single way to go about setting a research question. The following is a guide that may facilitate the process. Some of this may need to be refined depending on the type of research that is being done, e.g. quantitative research.

There are four steps that may assist with developing a research question:

1. Deciding on a **broad topic**.
2. Selecting a **narrow topic** within the broad field.
3. Further refining this to a **focused topic.**
4. Setting a specific **research question(s)**.

## Deciding on a broad topic.

Selecting a broad topic helps guide your literature review. It indicates the broadest area of interest that you have for your research. It is important that you are ***genuinely*** interested in the topic that you have selected. You will need to spend a fair amount of time researching the topic and being passionate about the topic will help you to stay motivated.

E.g. Democratisation in Africa.

When conducting your preliminary research, make note of the questions that seem to frequently arise within your broad research topic. Often there are seminal questions that relate to your topic – being familiar with these debates is important.

## Selecting a narrow topic within the broad field.

Begin to narrow the broad topic down. This can be done a number of ways, such as by considering relevant theories, and using your other research interests to qualify your research topic. You could further narrow it by considering:

* Time period.
* Particular events.
* Geographical area.
* Biographical information – gender; age; ethnicity.
* Other aspects or fields – economic; psychological; historical.
* Available data.

E.g. The role of women in democratisation in Anglophone Africa.

Explain how the topic was narrowed. How were items from the list used to refine the topic?

* In the above example gender and language group were used to refine ‘democratisation in Africa’.

## Further refining this to a focused topic.

This is similar to the earlier process. Between this and the previous step, the student should have done further research within their **narrow topic**. This will allow them to further focus the topic in light of the dominant debates in the field, as well as having a good idea of what resources are available to answer the question. Furthermore, ensuring that they can address the topic given the scope of their paper should be another tool used to focus their topic.

E.g. The role of urban women in democratisation in South Africa between 1999 and 2004.

Explain how the topic was narrowed. How were items from the list used to refine the topic?

* In the above example gender; location; country; time period were used to refine the question.

Mention the logic behind the limitations introduced. For example, 1999 and 2009 were selected because President Thabo Mbeki was in power for these two electoral terms. This allows some control over some variables, such as leadership. Additionally, time would have lapsed since 1994, possibly allowing democratic mechanisms to be more familiar to citizens. Furthermore, there is sufficient time between that period and the present for academic debates to have developed.

## Setting a specific research question(s).

A research question should be clear, concise, focused and specific. As you research the topic further, you may realise the complexity of the topic. This may lead to your having a number of sub-components to your question. This should help you to produce a coherent paper.

You need to think carefully before settling on a question. You should be able to explain the rationale behind the question set. For example, is your question a theoretical one (why did you use the methodology chosen)? Why did you decide to use a theoretical model to answer your question? Is your question in line with the requirements of the course? Can you address the question set in a meaningful way within the word limit?

An example of a research question could be: “How did urban women use protest between 1999 and 2009 as a tool for promoting democracy in South Africa?”

Explain how the question was derived. The question is clearly in line with the focused topic set earlier, but has been further refined.

* Gender, location, country, time period, AND a narrower idea of ‘democratisation’ have been used.

It is important to understand what the **key concepts** are in the question. Many words that we take for granted as having a single mean in everyday speak is hotly contested in academia. Using the above example, words that may be considered key concepts that should be defined in the introduction may include: “protest”; “democracy”; “promoting democracy”; “urban”; and even what is meant by “tool”. To make this clearer, consider “urban”. Does this include peri-urban areas? Only metropolitan areas? Only Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban? Why? The reason may simply be because of available and reliable data.

It is **important** to be careful not to make hidden assumptions during the process of setting your question. For example, do not assume that there is a positive relationship between women and democracy promotion. Such assumptions may lead to you overlook other important results that may arise from your research. You may test your assumptions (in the form of researched hypotheses), but do not take for granted that they are correct.

The overall picture the student should get for this process is of an inverted triangle.

**RQ**

**BROAD TOPIC**

**NARROW TOPIC**

**FOCUSED**

**TOPIC**

# CONCLUSION: What to avoid.

**Class Activity:** Before finishing off, you may wish to try make the students participate in the ‘inverted triangle’ process themselves. Ask someone to volunteer a broad topic that is in line with your course. Then encourage them to follow the next steps, until arriving a research question. This activity may help to prompt further questions, as well as demonstrate that there is no single question that will be arrived at from the broad topic. Depending on personal interests, methodology, as well as available resources, there will be a number of different questions derived for any topic.

You may also want to include an example of a bad research question, and ask students how they think it could be improved. Then put up an example of an improved version.

This can be phrased as a list of things to avoid, or could be a checklist summary of the earlier points covered by this lecture.

Students should avoid:

1. Underestimating how long a process setting a research question is.
   * It requires significant research, editing and reflection.
2. Setting a question beyond the scope of their assignment.
   * Arriving at a narrow topic is a difficult process – it is unlikely that your topic is too narrow.
3. Using unclear wording.
   * Revise your question. Try phrasing it differently. Ask a friend what they think the question implies.
   * This is why defining your key concepts is crucial – your grader may interpret your research question differently to what you intended and grade you according to their interpretation if you have not made it clear what your key concepts mean.
4. Feeling stuck with your question.
   * Consult with your tutor – you may want to further refine your question as you read more literature. You may realise that you can focus it more. This is an on-going process.
   * That said, try to settle on something as soon as possible so that you can begin writing the actual paper. This is also a time-consuming process!

**Please note:** There is an accompanying resource that could be distributed to students if you see fit. It is a table that may help to encourage logical and rational thinking during the process of setting a question. This should be edited to be more relevant for your course.

**References used for this lecture:**

“Guide to Undergraduate Dissertations,” Sheffield Hallam University. Available at: http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/research-question.html.

“How to Write a Research Question,” George Mason University. Available at: http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/?p=307.

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| **Research Question** | **Data Sources and Methods** | **Justification** | **Practicalities (e.g. resources and skills)** | **Ethical Issues** |
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