

Sage Research Methods: Data and Research Literacy

How to Develop Research Questions: The First Stage of The Social Research Toolbox, QGAP

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Learning Outcomes

- Having read this guide, readers should be able to . . .
- explain the importance of the research question for social research projects;
- identify sources of inspiration for new research questions;
- formulate a researchable question from a broad research topic;
- recognize a good research question; and
- understand how research questions are shaped by different methodological traditions.

Introduction

“A research topic is not the same thing as a research question!” I frequently say this to students, and it is because I have said it so often that I felt motivated to write this short guide about how to develop *researchable* research questions. So often students will come to my office and say they have an idea for their dissertation, assignment, or project and then proceed to list very broad topic areas such as “the unfair use of police stop-and-search protocols” or “how social media affects young people’s mental health” or “how sustainable fashion is becoming more popular.” All these topics are very interesting and worthy of further research, but they are not research questions. A research question should be clear and precise so that

it;

- -defines the research process that will be undertaken,
- -sets the boundaries around what will and will not be explored,
- -gives the researcher direction, and
- -acts as a helpful frame of reference so you can evaluate your progress throughout the research journey.

In this guide, you will start by considering why research questions are important for all research projects and where to look for inspiration if you are a student struggling to come up with an idea for a research project. You will then be taken through a step-by-step process that will help you move from a general research topic to a researchable question. You will be encouraged to apply a simple heuristic tool (the five “W’s”) to help you refine your initial idea. The guide then explores how research questions are shaped by methodological stance and the types of data you have access to. By the end of the guide, you should be in a position to develop or recognize a good research question.

This guide forms part of the social research toolbox, or QGAP, series, which offers a simple way of conceptualizing the research process. Within the toolbox, there are four stages: (1) questions, (2) gathering data and evidence, (3) analyzing the data and evidence, and (4) presenting answers to your research questions. The four stages occur in all social research projects, and though they have been presented in a linear way for teaching purposes, the reality is that each stage is shaped by the others, and it is usual to move between stages at different points of the research journey. For example, when thinking about “Q” or the research ques-

tion, it might be that your research question shifts slightly once you have assessed what research has been done previously or once you start analyzing the data that has been collected. In presenting your findings, it may be that new research questions are generated that require the process to begin again. You can learn about QGAP by watching a short animation titled ‘What is the Social Research Toolbox?’ (which is included in this collection), and instructors can download some teaching PowerPoints that support the series here:



[Wheeler.Slides.QGAP1_DevelopResearchQuestions.pptx](#)

Why Are Research Questions Important?

Social scientists are curious about the social world that surrounds them, and most research that you will read is driven by questions about what, how, and why things happen in the way they do. As an example, a social scientist might ask what factors influence whether a household recycles its waste to try to encourage more people to engage in environmental action. Or they may be concerned with how smartphone use has impacted the learning and development of school-age children, the evidence for which could then drive interventions in the field of education or policy regulation. By asking and answering questions, researchers develop their ideas about what is going on, how different things might be related to one another, why that might be, and whether there might be a better way of doing things.

One of the key reasons why people do social research is because they want to try to make the world a slightly better place or try to improve a situation or practice by gathering research data or evidence that might help ameliorate that situa-

tion ([O’Leary, 2017](#)). But in order to get to the stage of developing useful research knowledge, it is essential to have a clear and precise question. A clear research question identifies the purpose of your research study, gives hints about how you may go about investigating it, and sets boundaries around what is of interest and what is not. For example, questions should name the research topic area and use key concepts and terms that indicate what sort of approach would be appropriate. If the research question asks about the prevalence of a practice, this would likely indicate a quantitative approach, whereas if it asks about the meanings people attach to practices, this would indicate a qualitative approach. A clear research question directs the research journey—though some diversions may be required—and enables the researcher to evaluate whether they have reached their destination.

Though research questions are central to the research process, students and those new to research often report difficulty developing them. Even experienced researchers recognize the complexity and “deep thought” required to develop “robust and answerable” research questions ([Green & Stoneman, 2016](#)). For some students who are required to conduct research for their university studies, it can be a challenge to think of a research problem to begin with, whereas for others the difficulty comes in creating a research question that matches the context they are operating within. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Where Can You Get Inspiration for Research Questions?

If you are struggling to come up with a research question, there are different places to look to for inspiration. The first is to your own experiences, as these

may hold the key to topics that you are passionate about. As the famous Sociologist C. Wright Mills argued, the best researchers “do not split their work from their lives” ([Wright Mills & Gitlin, 2000](#), p. 195). Instead, he entreated the student to “use your life experiences in your intellectual work” ([Wright Mills & Gitlin, 2000](#), p. 196). For instance, my idea for my PhD research came to me while I was working for a coffee networking organization whose members frequently had discussions about fair trade certification and the relative merits of this consumer label over other certification schemes and marketing devices. It was these conversations that sparked my initial interest in consumer awareness of fair trade and how this label had become so well recognized over other schemes. By drawing on my life experiences, I could identify social networks that could help me on my research journey and use my background knowledge to build toward a researchable question (see [Wheeler, 2012](#)). So think about your hobbies, your working and leisure experiences, and your everyday commitments as these may prove fruitful areas for potential research topics.

But if nothing about your own experiences immediately motivates you to develop a research question, you could look to media sources, government policies, or NGO websites to explore which topics are timely and interesting to you. Look for things that raise a puzzle about why something is the way that it is. For example, when I was preparing my introductory social research lectures a few years ago, I saw a series of media stories about a “new” mental health problem—*nomophobia*, or the anxiety of being without one’s mobile phone—which I used to demonstrate how a research topic could become a research question.

Past research can also be a great source for developing research questions as it is often the case that researchers highlight areas in need of further study when they are presenting their findings. Look at the discussion and concluding sections of journal articles or at literature review or meta-analysis articles, as these will often include ideas for areas that need further research.

Finally, have conversations with peers, colleagues, and community contacts to see what they think could be a good topic to research. You could visit community events or public meetings to find out the needs of local stakeholder groups. There is a growing tradition of coproducing research, especially in the context of decolonizing methodological practices, which involves listening to our research communities, valuing their perspectives on the things that matter, and using their local expertise to together formulate research that will be of use to all parties ([Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021](#)).

Research Context Matters

Another element to consider is the context the research question is developed for. Student research projects can be motivated from just curiosity, but their wider context is to demonstrate the students' ability to undertake research independently. Undergraduate students often get worried that their research is not "novel" enough, but it is important for these students to remember that they are doing the research within a tight time and budget context with a limited repertoire of research skills at their disposal and so feasibility and research ethics ([Anderson & Corneli, 2018](#)) will often be more important than novelty (though you should check

your own institutional guidance for research expectations). Research beyond the undergraduate level needs to show value beyond curiosity and skill development. This might be in the form of a contribution to the existing knowledge base or the development of recommendations for social policy.

Most research beyond academia is driven by specific needs and objectives. Organizations will often employ researchers to find out about their existing policies and programs and their impacts on defined populations, for example. In these cases, research questions are likely to be defined by others. However, it is important to have in mind what a good research question looks like to know if the research questions you are tasked with can be answered by the data available. Having conversations to refine these questions so they are more researchable will be important in this context.



Section Summary

- A clear and precise research question is fundamental for defining the purpose, scope, and methodology of a study.
- Developing good research questions can be challenging, especially for students or inexperienced researchers. It requires “deep thinking” and a good match between the question and research context.
- Inspiration for research questions can come from personal experiences (like hobbies or work), looking at media stories or government/NGO priorities, previous academic research, and conversa-

tions with communities.

- Being aware of the external factors that are shaping the research context (such as degree progression, policy impacts, or organizational needs) as well as the budget, skills, and time available to do the research is important when designing and appraising research questions.

How Do We Develop Good Research Questions?

Once you have a broad topic area (or perhaps a more tightly defined research question defined by or negotiated with an external partner), it is time to refine this (or evaluate this) to ensure that it meets the criteria of a good research question. [Table 1](#) offers an overview of the characteristics of good or *researchable* research questions. We often have lots of ideas for research projects, but transforming these ideas into feasible, precise, and researchable questions takes time and a certain mastery of your research field.

Table 1: Criteria for “good” research questions

Your re- search question should be...	Key considerations

Interesting to you	If the research question is not interesting to you, you will find it difficult to maintain your motivation for the project. You should also consider whether the topic area is too close to your interests, which may make it difficult to maintain a critical reflexive stance (e.g., active consideration of how your assumptions, biases, and positionality are affecting the project).
Relevant to the field and your expertise	The research question should have relevance to the research context it is developed for—this may be its potential to make an academic contribution to knowledge, generating findings that are useful, or meeting the learning outcome requirements for an undergraduate dissertation. Evaluate whether you have the expertise (methodological and substantive) to conduct this research.
Precise	The research question should not be too broad and should set clear boundaries around what is of interest and what is not. It should include reference to key concepts and hints about methodology in its formulation.
Doable	Ask yourself whether you have the time frame, the budget, and the skills to answer this research question. For example, is it feasible to access the proposed research participants? Is the question answerable through the data you can collect or access?
Ethical	All research must conform to ethical standards and should not cause harm to participants. Research ought to be geared toward the “greater good” with benefits to society. Research conducted in academic settings will need to be reviewed by an ethics committee, so can your question get through? This criterion links to the “doability” of your research question.

The 5 “W’s”

As I suggested in the opening of this guide, what I have noticed students struggle most with is moving from a broad research topic to a precise research question. I would advocate for developing just one clear overarching research question for student projects rather than multiple questions (which you do sometimes see in larger projects where sub-questions are derived from an overarching question). I use a very simple heuristic to help students develop researchable research questions, which I call the 5 “W’s.” The 5 “W’s” stand for what, where, when, who, and why. Take your broad topic area and systematically ask yourself the 5 “W’s” to help refine your research idea. Alongside the 5 “W’s,” keep in mind the other criteria for good research questions ([Table 1](#)).

Let's work through an example: Suppose I was interested in the fair trade movement (the consumer label that signals that producers have been given a "fair" price for their crop) as a broad research area. How can I move from this to a researchable question? The first thing I would need to work out is **what** am I interested in? I could be interested in the fair trade movement from a policy or organizational perspective, the consumer perspective, or the producer perspective. I would need to sit down and really work out what area I wanted to explore and the academic expertise needed to drive this study. I would also need to think about what is feasible—though I might fancy studying fair trade producers in Kenya, I may not have the funds, language skills, research contacts, or enough time to support that.

Suppose I have decided I am interested in fair trade consumers. I then need think about **where** I am interested in finding out about this—would this study be based in the UK (where I am based) or in a different country or even be a comparative study? Do I want to look at this at a national level (across the whole country) or within one or two communities? Again, what is feasible given the scope and funds I have for my project?

When am I interested to find out about this—would this be a historical exploration, which may involve archival or documentary research, or would I want to look at it in the present day by talking with consumers about their shopping? Or I could focus on a time-specific campaign like "Fairtrade Fortnight" and explore how fair trade consumption is promoted during these weeks. I could envisage a study that followed individuals or organizations over time, with repeated interactions between the researcher(s) and participants. With all of these options, I should be asking

what is relevant and doable.

Who am I interested to get data from? If I want data from consumers themselves, do I need a representative sample according to key socio-demographic criteria, or will a purposive sample of particular types of consumers suffice? Perhaps I am instead interested in those organizations that speak on behalf of consumers—such as the Fairtrade Foundation or the Ethical Consumer—or those that speak to consumers—such as fair trade companies, marketing agencies, or supermarkets that are selling and promoting these products. Can I access participants or relevant documents? Are there any ethical concerns that might prevent my access?

And finally, **why** am I interested in this topic? Do I want to better understand fair trade consumption so I can help organizations better target their marketing to different categories of consumers? Or do I want to understand where there are educational gaps in consumers' knowledge? Or am I interested in contributing to academic knowledge about sustainable consumer behavior?

Once I have interrogated my broad topic area with the 5 “W’s,” I should have a much clearer and more precise research question. For instance, two of the possible research questions that could have been developed from this process about general interest in the Fairtrade movement are the following:

1. How do fair trade consumers living in a fair trade town in the UK understand their support of the fair trade movement and their consumption choices?
2. What impact does the promotion of fair trade during the UK Fairtrade Fort-night campaign have on male, female, and nonbinary consumers' willing-

ness to purchase fair trade goods?

The process of moving from broad topic area to researchable question takes time. In addition to the 5 “W’s” heuristic and assessing your developing question against the key criteria of a good research question ([Table 1](#)), you should be speaking with supervisors or project managers and beneficiaries of the research, as well as undertaking a review of the relevant academic literature to get a sense of how far your research question will address a research gap and produce useful research evidence. This is where the next stage of the social research toolbox comes into play. Once you think you have a *researchable* research question, you then need to consider **how** you could “gather data and evidence” to answer it: **QGAP**. Before closing this section, it is important to acknowledge the iterative cycling between developing your question and gathering data/evidence in the early phases of your research. The degree to which your research question can change is partly influenced by the methodological tradition your research sits within.



Section Summary

- Developing a good research question requires moving from a broad topic toward an interesting, relevant, precise, feasible, and ethical question.
- You should interrogate your research idea by asking the 5 “W’s” (what, where, when, who, and why), which will help you break down the topic into manageable parts and ensure that the ques-

tion is well defined and researchable.

- Developing a research question is an iterative process that involves continuously refining the question, seeking feedback from supervisors or other research stakeholders, and reviewing relevant literature. It may evolve during data collection, depending on your methodological approach.

Developing Research Questions Within Different Methodological Traditions

Regardless of your methodological approach, having a clear research question is central to all research projects, whether they are qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods projects using primary or secondary data sources. That said, there are some differences between research questions developed for differently framed research projects. Here is not the place for a discussion of the philosophical and epistemological debates about the nature of social reality and what counts as acceptable ways of generating knowledge. (For a good discussion of this, see [Braun & Clarke, 2013](#); [Gilbert, 2016](#); [Thomas, 2017](#)). But it is important to recognize that our theoretical frameworks (the accumulated knowledge about how the social world operates according to different disciplinary perspectives), our methodological choices, and our approach to data analysis are all closely connected and should be actively reflected on when designing research questions. This section

explores how research questions differ between qualitative and quantitative traditions and how their development varies according to whether primary or secondary sources of data are consulted.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research Questions

Qualitative research is usually informed by an interpretive paradigm, so research within this tradition explores the meanings (or interpretations) that people attach to their social worlds and their subjective understandings and experiences ([Braun & Clarke, 2013](#); [Ritchie et al., 2014](#)). The data that tends to be collected for qualitative projects is usually in the form of text, images, or audiovisual materials gathered through interviews, observations, and documents. The sorts of research questions that can create this sort of data usually begin with “How” and “What” rather than seeking to develop causal explanations. Thinking back to our questions on fair trade consumption from the previous section, question 1 on the meanings of fair trade consumption to consumers living in a fair trade town would be more suited to a qualitative approach. Theory is often built through data-rich descriptions (often described as an “inductive approach”), so while academic literature or existing theories will shape your research question, they do not drive it in the same way as for quantitative research questions. It is common for qualitative research questions to be conceived of in a flexible way and for them to shift during the research process in response to the depth and richness of the data collected and analyzed.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, tends to be informed by a positivist paradigm that seeks to uncover observable patterns that can be measured to offer

explanations for why things are happening (e.g., why X leads to Y) ([Kumar, 2014](#); [Williams et al., 2021](#)). It relies on large datasets collected through standardized instruments like surveys or experiments or routinely collected records that are analyzed in numerical form. The objective of this analysis is to test whether existing theory can explain social phenomenon (often described as a “deductive approach”). This “theory testing” approach requires research questions to be precise and clearly identify key concepts. These concepts must then be operationalized—translated into measurable indicators—to enable systematic data collection and analysis. For example, the “effectiveness” of fair trade advertising during Fairtrade Fortnight (from question 2 in the previous section) could be measured as a percentage increase in sales, while “willingness to consume” might be operationalized as the number of fair trade products purchased. In quantitative research, operationalized concepts often guide the development of hypotheses, which are specific, testable statements predicting relationships between variables. A hypothesis derived from question 2 might state: “Female consumers are more likely than male or non-binary consumers to purchase fair trade goods during Fairtrade Fortnight.” This statement can then be tested by gathering appropriate sales data and systematically evaluating the probability of the hypothesis through statistical analysis. While not all quantitative studies require formal hypotheses, they are commonly used to refine and focus the analysis and act as a bridge between the research question and later stages of the social research process. Research questions (and hypotheses) are typically fixed once data collection begins, unlike in qualitative projects.

Research questions in mixed methods projects are designed to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches, combining the need for measurable outcomes with rich contextual insights ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018](#)). For example, they might explore both how fair trade advertising influences purchasing decisions (quantitative) and why consumers value fair trade products (qualitative). Mixed-methods research questions are often more complex, aiming to integrate the strengths of both paradigms, and will lead to specific research design choices (see [Creswell, 2013](#), for a discussion of mixed-methods designs).

Research Questions Based on Primary or Secondary Data

When developing research questions, you also need to think forward to the sources of data that could be available to answer your research question. An important distinction is between primary and secondary sources of data. With primary data collection, the researcher or research team is in control of gathering data through social research methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, or observations) and so can ensure that the data collected can answer the research question—though, of course, errors can occur at the research design phase that compromise this. Conversely, with secondary research data sources (like survey data or interview data gathered for a different research purpose) and secondary data sources (like marketing materials, media content, and archival documents), the sorts of questions you can ask will be influenced by what is available in that data. So, in this case, you will likely need to move between the “gathering” and “question” stage of the research process before you are able to formulate your research question.



Section Summary

- Qualitative research questions are typically more open and flexible and can evolve through the research process. Qualitative research questions aim to collect data that focuses on understandings, meanings, and experiences in order to develop theory from the data (inductive approach).
- Quantitative research questions are precise and will focus on key concepts and measurable indicators. These questions are often framed to test existing theories (a deductive approach), requiring them to be fixed before data collection begins.
- The type of data (primary or secondary) available influences the development of research questions. Primary data allows researchers to gather data tailored to their questions, while secondary data requires researchers to adapt their research questions based on the content of available data sources.
- Though developing a research question is the first phase of the social research toolbox, an iterative process between question formulation, data gathering, and data analysis is often required.

Conclusion

This guide has provided a concise overview of how to develop research questions for a social research project. All research should begin by developing a clear research question that will identify what precisely you are interested in researching

and the boundaries of your research interests. Research questions provide you with a clear direction for how to embark on the next phase of the research process, which involves gathering data and evidence to enable you to answer your question. That is not to say that the research question will necessarily stay the same throughout the research process as it is often iteratively transformed as you progress through the research, depending on your theoretical, methodological, and analytical stance. Many students and inexperienced researchers find it difficult to develop precise research questions, and this guide has introduced a step-by-step process to enable you to move from your broad topic area to a researchable question. The criteria for good research questions and the 5 “W’s” are useful tools to help you refine and evaluate a research question’s potential to generate robust and relevant social research. The next guide in the social research toolbox (QGAP) series turns to how to gather the research data and evidence to answer your research question.



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Why is a clear research question central to all research projects?

☐ a. It helps the researcher avoid reviewing the literature.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

- ☐ **b.** It defines the research process, sets boundaries, and gives direction.

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

- ☐ **c.** It eliminates the need for data collection.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer

is B.

2. Which of the following is a recommended source of inspiration for developing a research question?

☐ a. Drawing on personal experiences, media, or past research



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

☐ b. Consulting an unrelated field of study



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer

is A.

☐ c. Selecting a topic at random from a list



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

3. How would you transform a broad research topic into a precise research question?

☐ a. Start by collecting data and then determine the most relevant question



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

☐ **b.** Use the 5 “W’s” (what, where, when, who, why) to refine the topic



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

☐ **c.** Decide what the research methods should be and match the question to them



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

4. Which of the following characteristics define a good research question?

☐ a. It must be broad to allow flexibility in research.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

☐ b. It must be entirely novel, regardless of feasibility.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

☐ c. It must be interesting, relevant, precise, doable, and ethical.

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

5. How do qualitative and quantitative research questions typically differ?

- ☐ a. Qualitative questions are fixed and hypothesis-driven, while quantitative questions are flexible.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ b. Quantitative questions focus on subjective experiences, while qualitative questions seek to test theories.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

- ☐ **c.** Quantitative questions test theories, while qualitative questions explore meanings and experiences.

**Correct Answer**

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

SUBMIT**CLEAR****START OVER**

Further Reading

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