

Defining a Focus/Topic

Focus

The most effective way to create direction for your research is to start with a great question or thesis statement. Often students label their topic with a noun such as Law, or Animal Care, or Using an Electron Microscope. This topic title can be so broad it is overwhelming and when it is time to write the paper, can feel daunting.

Writing a great question or presenting a point of view in a thesis statement gives clear direction to the research and eventual outline and research paper.

Writing Essential Questions

What are research questions?

Research questions are clear, focused, concise, complex, and arguable questions around which you center your research. The questions should be about a topic that you, the writer, are genuinely interested in.

Why is a research question essential to the research process?

Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process. The specificity of a well-developed research question helps to avoid the “all about” paper and work toward supporting a specific and arguable thesis/purpose.

When designing a learning experience, it is important to begin by asking essential questions that will be answered as a result of this project.

Examples:

- What is the best process for building a guitar?
- What are the critical differences between the education system here and in Ghana?
- What are the intended benefits of an extended yoga practice?
- What comprises strategic planning behind a candidates' campaign?

These questions drive your research and help you design your learning experience.

Steps for Developing Research Essential Questions

- **Choose an interesting general topic.** Your topic might be scuba diving. Choose something that is interesting, has information, and you can gain knowledge about. You can't write everything about scuba diving, so which aspects will you focus on?
- **Start asking questions.** Taking into consideration the breadth of any topic, start asking open-ended questions that will yield more information, such as those questions that start with “why” or “how.” For example, “How does one go about becoming certified to scuba dive?” or “Why are certain equipment and training necessary for scuba diving safety?”
- **Do some preliminary research on the general topic.** Then do a few quick searches on the topic to narrow the focus. What else is interesting about scuba diving? You might be fascinated by the places in the world where scuba diving is reputedly amazing. Or you may be interested in jobs that require scuba certification. Or you may come upon a fascinating article that poses questions about environmental impact of scuba diving on coral reefs. These searches can help focus attention and interest.
- **Consider your audience.** What level or depth of inquiry would work for this audience? Most school papers are read by an academic audience so think about how to capture their interest.

- **Evaluate your questions.** Are your questions clear? Do they ask one thing or more than one thing? Are they specific but not too narrow or too broad?
- **Narrow down and formulate your essential questions.** There is always more to learn, more to know. One paper is not going to cover an entire topic. For example, cake decorating could cover tools, history, traditions, cultural difference, science of baking, discovery of fondant, science of food coloring, impact of changing cultural perceptions on cake design, cost analysis for catering...etc. One paper will not and should not try to cover it all. Pick your essential questions carefully.

Now improve those questions.....

Developing Better Questions

The quality of the question determines the direction and quality of the research. Some questions are simple and straight-forward while others are more in-depth and require more information to answer it. Develop essential questions so they will yield more focused research and results. Below are examples of simple questions and their more developed counterparts.

Initial Questions often ask what or how (process)

Developed Questions might:

- **examine the context**
- **assess the consequences or impact**
- **compare two conditions or states**

How do you build a guitar?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is the impact of using different woods in guitar construction? ➤ How does the shape impact the tone? ➤ Which type of strings works with different guitar styles? ➤ What impacted the development of different types of guitar music? ➤ How does guitar shapes impact style of playing? ➤ Have tools changed the way guitars are built?
What is ballroom dancing?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How is ballroom dancing a reflection of culture? ➤ Which fitness and strength training actions help ballroom dancers? ➤ What is the impact of music development of

		ballroom dancing?
What do they do in a microscopy lab		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is the relationship between a microscopy lab and the hospital? ➤ How has the process for viewing slides changed over time? ➤ What is the impact of an electron microscope on the work of a hospital-based pathology lab? ➤ How does one prepare slides? ➤ What are the funding sources (financial model) for private vs. university microscopy imaging centers?
What does a surgeon do?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Which training is most effective: fellowships, coursework, on-line learning, or hands-on mentoring? ➤ How have surgical techniques changed in the last several decades? ➤ What is the impact of the internet on the day-to-day life of a surgeon? ➤ How have improvements in surgery impacted patients, both positive and negative?
Why do people live in cities?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How can cities be designed to increase livability? ➤ What is the impact of urban planning on healthy lifestyles? ➤ What are elements of a city that create its character? ➤ How is urban planning helping to solve some of the world's current issues?
What is required for cross-fit workout?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What increases the positive impact of fitness training? ➤ What is the benefit of pairing different exercises together in a training program? ➤ How does one tailor cross-fit training for the

		individual?
<p>What is 52 Kids Foundation? (substitute: Boys & Girls Club, King Street Youth, any non-profit organization)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is the impact of community organizations on the well-being of children? ➤ How has the strategic actions of (name of organization) made a difference? ➤ How has funding or support from x impacted the types of programs and services offered? ➤ Why does x organization define their target audience as _____?