

# FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION



# Outline

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1. Aims
2. What is a research question?
3. Starting the process
  1. Broad Topic
  2. Narrow Topic
  3. Focused Topic
  4. Research Question
4. What to avoid

# Aims

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- The importance of a good research question.
- The components of a good research question.
- Begin the process of formulating a research question.
- What to avoid when formulating a question

# A research question

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- Starting point for investigations in the natural and social sciences.
- Directs and focuses research.
  - Dependent upon quality of question set.
- Must be focused, narrow, clear and concise.
- Set a question of genuine interest.

# Starting the Process

1. Broad Topic
2. Narrow Topic
3. Focused Topic
4. Research Question

# Broad Topic

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- The broadest area of your research interest.
- Your broad topic will help to guide your literature review.
- Make note of the dominant questions within the topic you are researching.
- E.g. **Democratisation in Africa.**

# Narrow Topic

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- After some research, you can begin to narrow the topic.
- Consider:
  - Relevant theories/models.
  - Time period.
  - Particular events.
  - Geographical area.
  - Biographical information – gender; age; ethnicity.
  - Other aspects or fields – economic; psychological; historical.
  - Available data.

# Consider...

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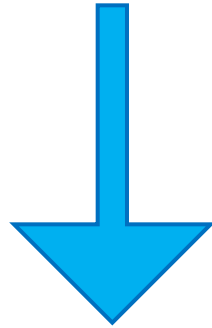
**“Democratisation in Africa.”**

How could you narrow this down?



# Consider...

**“Democratisation in Africa.”**



**“The role of women in democratisation in Anglophone Africa.”**

The broad topic was refined by using gender and language group.

# Focused Topic

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- Similar process to earlier step.
- You should now be familiar with the major debates.
- You should also have a good sense of what information and resources are available.

**“The role of women in democratisation in  
Anglophone Africa.”**



**“The role of urban women in democratisation in  
South Africa between 1999 and 2004.”**

# The Logic of Narrowing

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- You should have logical reasons for narrowing the topic the way that you have.
- The reasons may vary – interest; under-researched areas; available data; word limits.
- You should make your rationale clear – this usually is covered in the “significance of study” section of your paper.

# “The role of urban women in democratisation in South Africa between 1999 and 2004.”

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## Why 1999 and 2009?

- President Thabo Mbeki was in power for these two electoral terms.
  - This allows some control over some variables, such as leadership.
- Time since 1994, possibly allowing democratic mechanisms to be more familiar to citizens.
- Sufficient time between that period and the present for academic debates to have developed.

# Research Question

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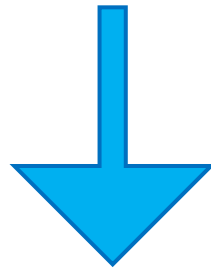
- Research should allow you to realise some of the complexity of your topic.
- May have a number of sub-components to your research question.
  - These should lead to a coherent paper – do not have a series of unrelated questions for the sake of it.

# Research Question

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- Think carefully before settling on a question.
- You should be able to explain the rationale behind the question set.
  - E.g. Why did you use the methodology chosen?

**“The role of urban women in democratisation in South Africa between 1999 and 2004.”**



**“How did urban women use protest between 1999 and 2009 as a tool for promoting democracy in South Africa?”**



# Key Concepts

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- You need to understand the key concepts in your question.
- You should define these concepts in your introduction – these often are deeply contested.

**“How did urban women use protest between 1999 and 2009 as a tool for promoting democracy in South Africa?”**

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“Protest”; “democracy”; “promoting democracy”;  
“urban”; and even “tool”.

### **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.

# Hidden Assumptions

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- Be careful not to make assumptions during the process of setting your question.
  - For example, do not assume that there is a positive relationship between women and democracy promotion.
- May lead you to overlook other important results.
- Test your (researched) hypotheses
  - Do not take for granted that they are correct.



**BROAD TOPIC**

**NARROW TOPIC**

**FOCUSED  
TOPIC**

**RQ**

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# What to avoid

# Do not...

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- Underestimate time
  - Setting a question requires a lot of research, editing and reflection.
- Set a question beyond the assignment's scope
  - Usually cannot be narrow enough!
- Use unclear wording
  - Alternative phrasing?
- Feel 'stuck' with a question