

FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION



Outline

2

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

3

- 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

4

- 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

6

- 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

7

- 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...

8

“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

10

- 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

12

- 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.”

13

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

14

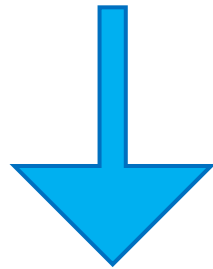
- Research should allow you to realise some of the complexity of your topic.
- May have a number of sub-components to your research question.
 - These should lead to a coherent paper – do not have a series of unrelated questions for the sake of it.

Research Question

15

- 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

17

- 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?”

18

“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

19

- 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

21

What to avoid

Do not...

22

- 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