



Defining your research question: video tutorial

<http://www.screencast.com/t/sfJ1L62FOxpT>

Transcript

Introduction: Welcome to this tutorial on defining a question for your dissertation brought to you by Reading University's Study Advice team. It is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time

Slide 2: Whilst some may come to their research project with a clear question in mind, most will have an idea of a subject area. Moving to a question can be an anxiety provoking time as you feel the need to get started on your dissertation quickly but this is an important step and there are a number of ways forward

Slide 3: Good research questions come once you have fully explored a subject area. Identify areas within your modules that interest you. To help generate ideas around this topic you could read around it, chat to friends and maybe start to think about specific areas of interest. Also be alert when reading for ideas. You can often find ideas for research suggested at the end of journal articles. These can help to generate more specific questions and offer suggestions for your methodology.

Slide 4: Often students think they have a question when in reality they still have a topic. You may need to ask yourself a series of questions to help you get to this stage. You might for instance be interested in 'children's picture books' but this in itself is not a question. What is it about them that interest you? Is it how they can be used to develop reading skills in young children, or develop their imagination or perhaps how they have developed over the past 20 years? Trying to think of a question as 'problem' may also help. What is it that you are trying to find out about your topic and why?

Slide 5: Another way to generate a question is by brainstorming. You can do this by thinking about potential questions that you could look to answer. Then try and prioritise these. You might want to group some together and look at some sub questions, or break down some of the questions further. The trick here is finding something that is manageable within the time and word count that you have.

Slide 6: Once you have a question in mind it is worth checking that it is fit for purpose. Checking it against the following criteria will ensure it is robust enough. This is also the sort of criteria your supervisor will be thinking of.

Slide 7: Firstly, It is important that your topic is of interest to you as it will be with you for a while and you will need the motivation to continue.

But interest in a topic is not enough. There also needs to be some existing literature in the area you chose to focus on. So have a quick look on the library databases to see if there is anything on your chosen field to help you frame your study

Slide 8: You also need to ensure that your question is the right level of depth. Questions that are too broad will offer too much material and not allow you to pursue your subject in the depth it needs. Equally questions that are too specific will yield insufficient material and you will struggle to meet the word count required. A good question may have 2 or 3 sub questions which you will be able to explore further.

Slide 9: You also need to consider what's feasible in the time you have. If you intend to do some primary research, do you have access to your sample? Will you be able to interview the people you need? For instance, are you going to be able to interview the children about their thoughts on certain pictures books or might you be better getting the parents' perspectives? It is worth considering what is realistic and possible before you define your question.

The best questions are clear and simple. A muddled question will result in a muddled answer. This is when it would be good to talk to friends and test out your question. Be open to responses and feedback and remember research questions need to be shaped and crafted and spending time at this stage will indeed save you time later on.

Summary: Finally remember research questions need to be flexible and not necessarily set in stone. As you continue to research your area, you might find that your question changes slightly. Be open to this and allow some flexibility as you move through the process. So some final tips on defining your question.

- Explore your topic in depth before deciding on a set question
- Read around the subject, chat to friends and sound out your ideas
- And finally remember good questions are clear and simple. They hold some interest to you and offer some literature for which you can frame your study.