

# Formulating a Research Question

The UNA University Writing Center  
Writing & Research Process  
Workshop Series

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# Goals

- Understand why we develop academic research questions.
- Consider strategies for developing research questions.
- Begin formulating our own research questions.

# Why Create a Research Question?

- Curiosity is “the desire to learn or know about anything; inquisitiveness” (Dictionary.com)
- Research is “diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, applications, etc.” (Dictionary.com)
- Considered together, curiosity is the source of our questions – we ask because we want to know; research is the means by which we find an answer.
- In academic work, we formulate clear questions to guide us in our search for answers.

# A Research Question is...

- Something you want to know about your discipline, or about a specific area within your discipline.
- Not a topic, fragment, phrase, or sentence. It ends with a question mark!
- Clear and precisely stated. It is not too broad, nor is it too narrow.
- Open-ended, as opposed to closed. It cannot be answered in a sentence or phrase.

# Personal Knowledge and the Research Question (Strategy #1)

- List your interests as they pertain to your specific discipline or assignment.
- Consider one of the items on your list. Jot down everything you know about the topic as quickly as you can (list or paragraph form is fine).
- Now find the answers to the following questions in your freewrite, or add the answers to your freewrite: “Who? What? When ? Where? Why? How? So what?” and “What if...?”
  - These represent possible “gaps” in your knowledge; the last four are particularly tough because they are open-ended – they often lead to good research questions .
- Continue steps 2 and 3 with each item on your initial list until you have found an open-ended question you would like to answer.

# Secondary Sources and the Research Question (Strategy #2)

- READ

- Often times, we don't know what we are curious about until we read about subjects that interest us first. Go to the library, and also search online academic and professional sites related to your discipline and topic.
- After you have read, try doing strategy #1 again!

# Modes of Thought and the Research Question (Strategy #3)

- Consider the Rhetorical Modes which we all use to organize our ideas in speaking or writing.
  - Comparison & Contrast
  - Process
  - Classification or Division
  - Cause & Effect
  - Problem & Solution
- Consider “Why? How? So what?” and “What if...?” for each of these modes.

# Focusing and Supporting Research Questions

- Focusing Question -- The most important question you discovered from the three prior activities.
- Supporting Questions -- Questions that will help you explore the relationships around the focusing question in greater depth.
- Example
  - Focusing Question: How can the university community increase its economic impact on the Florence-Muscle Shoals community?
  - Supporting Questions: How does the university currently impact the community economically? What could be done that isn't being done, and why? What are the limitations?



# Remember as you G(r)o(w)...

- Make your question one that somebody else will want an answer to as well. They will be your **AUDIENCE**.
- Your **PURPOSE** is your reason for asking your question. The answer to your research question will be a complete statement expressed as a sentence – your **THESIS**.
- If you used a Rhetorical Mode to formulate your question, you should use that mode to **ORGANIZE THE PARAGRAPHS** of your paper (though you may certainly use other modes as you **DEVELOP** your ideas!)
- **Most importantly**, do not get discouraged or worried if you find your thesis or your beliefs changing – this is a natural part of the researching and writing processes!

# References

Ballenger, B. (2007). *The curious researcher: A guide to writing research papers* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.

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