

Crafting Good Research Questions
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Good questions...

1. *Usually draw on background knowledge.* Start with something you know. Think about what you've studied that interested you or that made you wonder.

2. *Often identify or begin from empirical puzzles or anomalous outcomes.* What things make you go "hmm?" Have you ever noticed two very similar situations with radically different outcomes? Have you ever noticed something that just didn't seem to make sense, or seen behaviors that don't seem to be achieving the actors' goals but they keep doing them anyway? Good questions are usually about the outcomes (what explains y?) rather than about the causes (what effects does x have?).

3. *Often use "reporter questions":* who, what, when, where, why, how. Good empirical questions end with a question remark and express some uncertainty; they go beyond asking about basic facts. They ask things like, "under what conditions," "how much," and "what relationship?"

Good questions usually do not...

1. *Have one-sentence or factual answers.* Unfortunately, this eliminates many who, what, and when questions. Good empirical research questions are not ones where you could get the answer from a publicly available source like Wikipedia, or by asking one knowledgeable person.

2. *Contain a lot of proper nouns.* Proper nouns, by definition, refer to specific cases, events, things, or people. The point of empirical research is usually to look for general causes or patterns across many cases. For example, the question "Why did the United States invade Iraq?" is too narrow for good empirical research. A better question might ask, "Why do states initiate wars?" Notice how the proper nouns became common ones: I determined what the specific case was an instance of – here, of a state initiating a war – and then asked my question about that. My new question's answers will explain not only why the US attacked Iraq but also why other states have started other wars.

3. *Have a single correct answer.* A good empirical research question is one where reasonable, educated people could disagree about the answer, at least before the analysis occurs. How does economic development affect the environment? One answer might be that development harms the natural environment because industrialization usually involves pollution, and economic growth usually involves increased numbers of automobiles (with their accompanying emissions) and increased consumption. Another answer might be that development is good for the environment, because as peoples' basic needs are increasingly met they have time, energy, and money to address things like the environment. Until we actually do the research, we cannot know which of those equally plausible answers is actually correct. It's also entirely possible that *neither* of them is correct, or that *both* are correct.

4. *Are feasible.* Think creatively, but also think – at least a little – in terms of feasibility. Data on the effects of fair trade on rural Nicaraguan villages, or on the safe sex practices of male sex workers in India, are not generally going to be available to you from your current location in Meadville. They're great ideas for a masters' thesis or dissertation, though, or any other project where you've got a longer time period and access to funding opportunities.

5. *Predict the future.* See points 3 and 4. How would you know if your answer is right, if it depends on events that haven't happened yet? These questions can be interesting to address in a concluding section, where you draw on your findings to make some predictions, but they aren't good material for an entire research paper.

Examples (both good and bad):

Will it continue to snow in Meadville?

What does the UN do?

Why do Ohioans distrust the UN more than do Pennsylvanians?

Does peacekeeping work?

I want to write about child soldiers.

When do states adjust their economic policies in response to economic downturns?

Why isn't Turkey an EU member?

How do perceptions of Turkey within EU member states affect Turkey's candidacy for EU membership?

Why are there no democracies in the Middle East?

How do authoritarians manipulate elections to remain in power?

Do negative ads affect voter turnout?

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Does ethnicity affect the length of civil wars?

Did ethnicity prolong the civil war in Guatemala?

Under what conditions does ethnicity prolong civil wars?

Will Iran stop its nuclear proliferation?

How do domestic struggles for power affect nuclear proliferation agendas?

When do regional parties win seats at the national level?

Does South Africa have a good policy toward HIV/AIDS?

When do states craft effective public health campaigns?

Why has the US opposed the ICC?

When do states oppose new international institutions?

Are Middle Eastern states authoritarian because Islam is incompatible with democracy?