

Step 2

Turning Interesting Topics into Productive Research Questions

This is a discussion about what an effective research question is and an exercise we have used to help students use their perspectives to identify interesting topics and turn them into productive research questions.

We have found that students are frequently challenged by what we mean by a *research question*. Most students have had exposure to terms such as *big question*, *essential question* and the like. We prefer the term *research question* because it is a term of art in all social and behavioral science inquiry—i.e. in many of the major's students will pursue in college-- and in the professional world. Put differently, a *research question* will mean the same thing in college as it does in *TfC* which is not the case for terminology created for middle and high schools.

For the most part, the term *research* has been used in our student's school lives to mean digging through documents to answer questions with right answers. At a more advanced level, students encounter critical thinking questions that ask for a compare/contrast response or require parts/whole reasoning. What students, however, are not used to are open-ended questions that don't have definitive answers. Indeed, some students are so rubric and grade-oriented that they have difficulty with the idea that a question can be precise *and* open ended. In *TfC* framing a research question, marks the beginning of a creative and exciting journey in which neither the student nor the teacher know the end point—i.e. answer. It is, then, entirely understandable that students will get a bit stuck figuring out what makes a question a research question.

The most effective research questions ask students to understand how a relationship they are interested in works—this is the precise part. To walk her students across the bridge from their prior exposure to flat, go-fetch, retrieval mindset to one that capitalizes on their natural need to

know more about the adult world, Valerie prefers to engage students in a discussion using if/then statements. These kinds of statements help students see relationships that can be analyzed with new data. At the end of this resource find if/then sentence templates that help students to translate topics that interest them into relationships.

Here are a few examples of issues that highlight relationships to get a conversation with your students started.

Issue: Young people are concerned about living in a high crime area.

- **A possible research question:** Are young people more likely to be victims of crime? (How would you find out?)

Issue: A diverse community is trying to increase civic engagement.

- **A possible research question:** How does race influence community involvement? (How would you find out?)

issue: In an effort to encourage teens to become more involved in their community, a high school has introduced a new civics program.

- **A possible research question:** What impact does a high school civics class have on the community involvement of students who take the class? (How would you find out?)

Issue: Citizens in an economically disadvantaged community report that the local police are not helpful and people in a middle-class neighborhood report that the police are helpful.

- **A possible research question:** Does income impact people's perceptions of the police? (How would you find out?)

Issue: The number of people voting in local elections in a town has declined dramatically in the last four elections.

- **A possible research question:** What factors influence people to vote in the town? (How would you find out?)

Once you are comfortable with your students' understanding of what a question that explores a puzzling relationship looks and sounds like, it is time to move on to a research team activity.

Instructions to the Research Groups:

Divide into your research teams. Each team with each team will read one of the resources and then take on the three tasks below.

I. Resources. We have found that students often lack basic information about their community—for example, the population. In addition, experience has taught us that it is often easier to come up with a topic of interest when students have actual data to push up against. Moreover, examining existing data is certainly one of the primary ways social scientists identify the puzzles they want to tackle.

- A United States Census website.
<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045213/3611964320/embed/accessible>
(census data for the town: find census data for your community at:
<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00>).
- A United States Health Data website.
https://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/files/county_profiles/US
- A local online news website

II. Tasks

1. Make a list of members of the group.
2. Choose a scribe and facilitator

3. Students like you have focused on topics like hunger, violence/safety, social media and community engagement, and voting, including lowering the voting age.
4. Take a look at these websites that provide data and information on your county, try bringing your perspective to bear on this information to generate two issues or topics you care about.
5. Using the sentence templates below translate these two topics into **two** questions that **NEED** to be answered and that you can research.
6. At the end of your work list what worked and didn't work for the research team with this assignment.

HINTS:

Here are a couple of hints to keep in the back of your mind as you think about translating a topic into a question.

1) ***Your perspective and that of others.*** Because you have developed your perspective, you are probably capable of identifying a lot of topics/issues from your own life.

However, once we start developing our question, we will need to ask whether your experiences represent only you as an individual or are also part of the experience of people your age, racial, gender, or economic group.

2) ***Data.*** What kind of data or evidence will answer our question? We don't want to choose a question that is best answered by opinions or is already answered.

3) ***Trade-offs or Giving something up to get something.*** When researchers translate a topic into a question they have to narrow and limit their focus. This narrowing is necessary to make an issue manageable so students can contribute in the time available. There is no right

way to narrow one's focus. Instead, the goal is to be aware of the trade-offs: What you are giving up and what you are getting when you narrow or refine a question?

A Practice Template to jumpstart the process of crafting research questions

Try inserting words into these sentence templates so they make sense for your topic:

1. What is the relationship between _____ and _____?
2. How do relationships between _____ and _____ influence _____?
3. How does _____ influence _____ and _____?
4. To what extent does the relationship between _____ and _____ impact _____?
5. What are the perceptions of (group of people) _____ to _____?
6. How might I use _____ and _____ to address _____?
7. To what extent does _____ influence _____?

