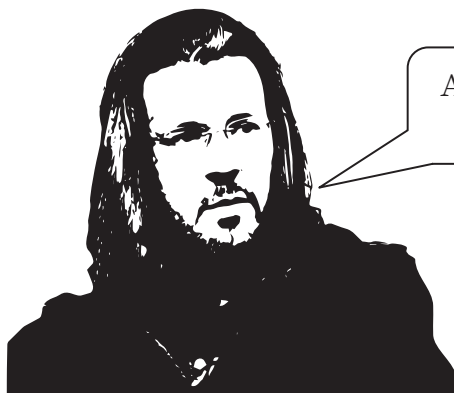


## CHAPTER 11

### Writing questions for research projects

At some point in your studies you will be asked to write your own research questions. Something like; *Why did the chicken cross the road?* This is a classic, and clearly a very funny joke. However, it would not make for a very good research question. We might want to know why the chicken crossed the road, but this question is too broad and does not define the segments of the analysis: the question does not address which chicken or which road, and thus isn't a useful question at all for research. When you come to write your dissertation, and in some cases for other assignments too, you will have to write your own research question. This is no easy task. You will hear what sounds like a million contradictions as you try to write your research questions; they are too broad, or too narrow, not original, too original. So how do we get them, right? Well let's start with this strange idea:



A fish doesn't know it  
is in water

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

David Foster Wallace, an American writer, is quite right, a fish doesn't know it is in water. What does he mean by this? And how would this help us in

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answering and writing questions? If you met a fish and asked them to explain what water is, they would reply, 'what is what?'. They are so surrounded by it that it is impossible for them to see it. They can't see it until they get outside of it, to look back at it from the outside – not easy for a fish to do. The same is true in examining society, media and communications. We are so surrounded by them that it is hard to step out and look back in – but this is just what we need to do when we are answering questions, and even more so when we are writing our own questions. To fully understand questions about society we can't look from our own experience or personal knowledge, but must look from the experience of all society and by drawing upon the knowledge of all scholars in the field so as to add to that knowledge – we need to be like a fish who can see the water... or something like that.

Let's take this idea and apply it to our chicken joke example to see how we might develop a research question.

We could improve the chicken question by making it more specific, and ask something like;



How many chickens crossed London Road in Oxford, England, on 21st April 2019?

This is better, but this doesn't really work as a research question either, as you could maybe answer this just by doing an internet search. And you could answer this question in one sentence, or even one word. It does not leave room for analysis, an important part of your work. It could, however, become data for a larger argument, but that doesn't make it a suitable research question alone.

Let's have another go:

What were the environmental factors that occurred in Oxford, England during April 2019, that changed the likelihood of chickens crossing London Road during that time?



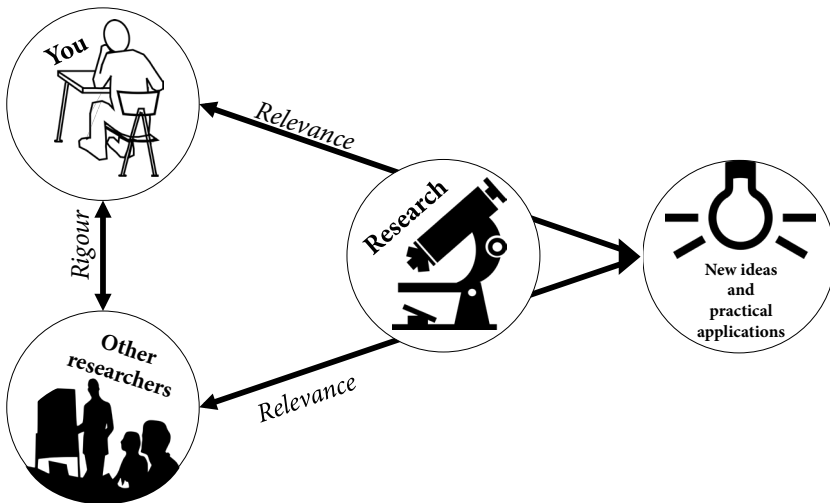
Now we are getting somewhere, this is a much more precise question. This question means you can take a stand about which factors are significant, and

allows you to argue to what degree the results are significant or not, and how much influence they have on chickens.

Those examples are all well and good, but how do we actually formulate a good question and research idea? To do that we need to understand your position within the research environment. By the time you come to write your own research questions you will have completed much of your studies and are already a researcher, and you should be starting to act like one too... even if that is a little scary at the beginning. Because you are a researcher it means your research question will be sitting within the broader research environment. You are now a cog in the wider world of research.

You have a whole load of ideas about how the world works, but now you are part of the wider research environment, you need to create **rigorous** research – that is research that is extremely thorough and careful – and you need to understand the research carried out by others. You also need to have an outcome that is related to practice, be this business, society, a company or a theoretical understanding of a phenomena. Between these sits your research, which through a rigorous design approach and being practice based, also becomes **relevant**.

The key here is that by making our research relevant and rigorous it goes beyond being something that you personally are interested in, and becomes something that the wider research community, business sector or society, is interested in knowing. And that is not only the key to writing a good research question, it is also key to writing an excellent dissertation.



## Generating ideas

It is usually simple to identify a theme or a general area of interest. However, the process of arriving at an idea that goes beyond your own questioning of the world, and developing the final form of a research question is more difficult and requires you to narrow the area of general interest, making it more specific. First, let's look at how to have an idea for a theme, and then we will narrow it down.

Start by thinking about your interests and motivation. This could be related to your future career, the most interesting book or article you've read, or perhaps a media company, type of content, technology or platform you love. You may also want to consider your own knowledge – perhaps about a company you are with or have worked at, a job you have done or a business, or a place you know well. Go back to look at what inspired you to join the Masters programme.

Another way to think of a research topic is to think about your **question as a problem**. This means considering a problem where the solution is something that is debatable and to which there might be a number of different solutions, but which is also something that the wider research community (not just you) might want to know about.

So, a bad question might be improved like this;

Bad	Has the internet affected sales of daily newspapers?	Here there is no debate to be had, much like our chicken example a simple internet search could give us the answer.
Good	How can news organizations respond to the threats posed by new media?	Here there is a lot of debate, and there is a lot of discussion to be had. Furthermore, it is a really important issue that lots of people would like to know the answer to and which would help contribute to the wider research environment.

A really good way to see if your research question is suitable in relation to the wider research environment is to apply ...

## The 'so what?' test

To do this test, have a think about what interests or inspires you about media and communications and then try completing these three sentences in order to see if your research question holds up to the standards mentioned above;



**Try it yourself:**

**Topic:** I am studying \_\_\_\_\_

**Question:** Because I want to answer \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_?

**Significance:** In order to help solve real world problem:

If you can't complete all three sections of this then you need to go back to the drawing board with your question. And if your friends or lecturers ask 'so what? Who cares?' about any of these three, then I'm afraid that, too means going back to the drawing board, because your topic just isn't of interest to the wider research environment or the world at large... a pain I know, however your research needs to be interesting to more than just you.

Our focus should not be on emerging technologies, but on emerging cultural practices



HENRY JENKINS

But what do we mean by culture and cultural practices. Whose culture are we discussing?

STUART HALL



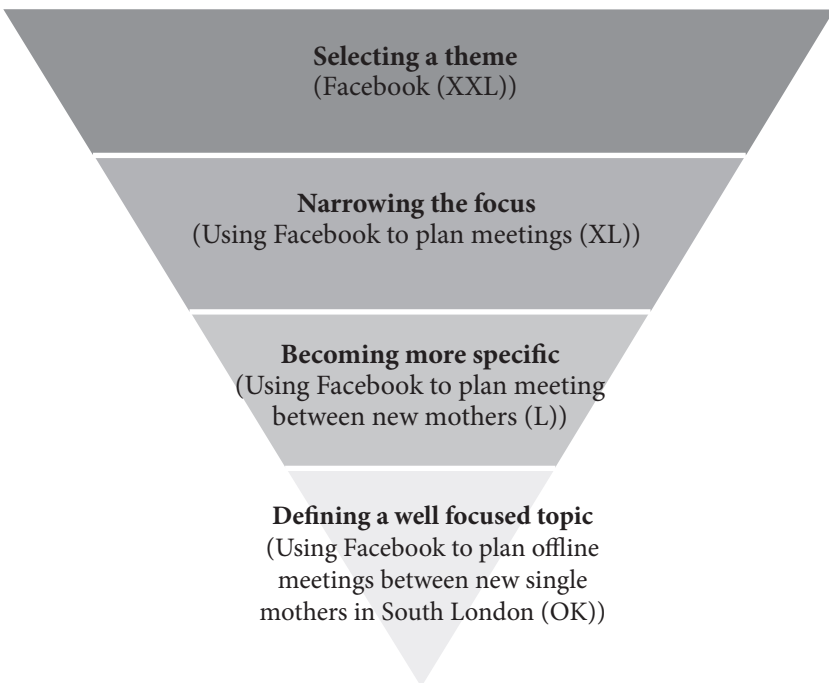
### Try free writing

*Free writing* is a prewriting technique in which you write continuously for a set period of time without thinking about spelling, grammar or topic. It is really good for getting ideas going and to draw out thoughts from deeper in your mind. To do free writing:

- Get a pen and paper.
- Set a timer for 2 minutes (you can set it for longer, but start with two minutes).
- When the timer starts write everything that comes into your mind. Don't stop writing until the alarm sounds, don't censor yourself, don't worry about spelling and don't stop to make corrections.
- Once the time is up, take a breather.
- Now look back at what you have written and pull out any useful ideas.

Now we have a topic we need to really focus that topic 'in'. We often use the image of the funnel to help represent the intellectual process of moving from a theme to a more focused subject.

Look at the example below which demonstrates this narrowing process:



Now it is time for you to try and write a research question of your own, think about:

- ✓ What will be studied
- ✓ Who will be studied
- ✓ When will they be studied
- ✓ Where will they be studied
- ✓ How it will be studied
- ✓ Why it will be studied.

And then borrow this template to shape the question:

(How/Why/What)(Who?) (Where?) (What?) (Why?) (How?)(When?).



How do new single mothers living in South London use Facebook to create offline community groups, and what impact does this have on childcare? A qualitative study of 75 new mothers through the summer of 2018.



**Try it yourself:**

How/Why/What \_\_\_\_\_ Who? \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_ What? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_?

How? \_\_\_\_\_ When? \_\_\_\_\_.

### Research question checklist

- ☐ My research question is something that I, and other people, will care about.
- ☐ I am able to take a stance in relation to the predicted outcome.
- ☐ My research tries to solve a problem, or puts a new spin on old ideas.
- ☐ My research question isn't too broad or too narrow.
- ☐ I have enough time to undertake this research deeply and properly.
- ☐ I have enough resources to carry out this work (money, time, people).
- ☐ I am able to measure the outcomes of my research.
- ☐ I am aware of contradicting arguments around my research question.

**AVOID**

- × Research questions that are not asked.
- × Research questions that are not answerable.
- × Research questions that have Yes/No answers.
- × Research questions whose answers don't produce any new knowledge.
- × Research questions that don't have 'symmetry of outcome'.
- × Research questions that are too broad.
- × Research questions that are too narrow.
- × Research questions that include presumptions.

**REMEMBER:**

While a good research question allows the writer to take an arguable position, it DOES NOT leave room for ambiguity.

### The wrong research question leads to wasted time and effort!

**CASE STUDY**

**Problem:** You're working hard, but you don't seem to be making progress. You're spending lots of time on side issues, changing your mind, finding lots of tangents that look interesting.

**Solution:** This may be a sign that your question is not clear enough. Try to get it down to a few short sentences. What are you trying to find? Keep asking the 'so what?' question. It might be useful to explain what your research is about to someone. They don't have to be an expert.

**CASE STUDY**

**Problem:** As you get immersed in the literature and research, lots of interesting topics emerge. You spend a lot of time on tangential issues here are endless interesting questions to answer, but you only have time to do one.

**Solution:** Once your question is clear, write it out in big letters on one sheet of paper and stick it prominently near your computer. As you get distracted, read the question, and decide if what you are reading or working on is directly relevant to your question.

Doing a Masters degree is all about questions, it is about reading the answers to other people's questions in texts; about asking questions in class; about answering questions in essays; about writing questions for dissertations. So many



questions! So, understanding how questions work is really important for getting along in your studies. When your professors set you questions to answer, they have a very particular idea in their mind about how these essays should look, and you can get inside their minds (don't stay too long) by understanding the language they use when they pose these questions. As you come to write your own questions, ensure you follow the formulas in this book, and look at examples from published works. And of course, if you are unsure about something ... Ask a question! Not asking a question might actually be more foolish, as Alice Walker American novelist and social activist reminds us;



People do not wish to appear foolish; to avoid the appearance of foolishness, they are willing to remain actually fools.

ALICE WALKER

### Reference

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