

Film 5: Writing Research Questions

Research questions inform the methodology of any study and hence the sampling, the methods and the analysis. So, writing good research questions is at the heart of good research.

Your research question derives from your aims, which are a broad statement of your research interest. As Peter Newby (2010, p.65) puts it, the “research question pins down the things we want to investigate.” So, you decide your topic, let’s say you’re interested in researching why young people choose to study a vocational course at college. Your research question might be:

Why do young people in a large urban college choose to study construction-related subjects?

That question is open and makes no apparent assumptions as to what the answer might be and it does not make assumptions about the value of those courses. It specifies a single college and a relatively narrow range of courses so it may be ‘doable’ to collect enough data from which to infer meaningful conclusions. But that would depend on the size of the college and the range of construction courses. Perhaps you will need to be more specific still:

Why do young people in a large urban college choose to study woodwork courses?

That is narrower, so any findings will also be more restricted in their scope. Early on in your study you will, of course, need to define ‘young people’, ‘large urban college’ and possibly ‘woodwork courses’, but this research question sets your study off in the right direction.

One question may be enough for the major study but you may want another related question, let’s say:

What factors are associated with successful outcomes for young people on woodwork courses?

Here you would need to define ‘successful outcome’ and this question has a broader conceptual range. It may therefore be too difficult to address within the kind of timescale you have for your major study.

So the scope of your research is defined by your research question or questions. As Denscombe (2002: 31) puts it: research questions “are the things that are directly investigated by the research—specific things that are observed, measured, interrogated in order to shed light on the broader topic.”

Now, there are dangers inherent in research questions; they can be reductive. That is, they may lead to the over-simplification of very complex issues and hence bland superficial research studies.

Similarly some research has been accused of leading to answers that justify government policy: something along the lines of:

How can a new policy be most effectively implemented?

So take care about the form of the question, show it to others to see how they understand it because they might find issues you had overlooked.

Research questions may also indicate relationships or causes between factors:

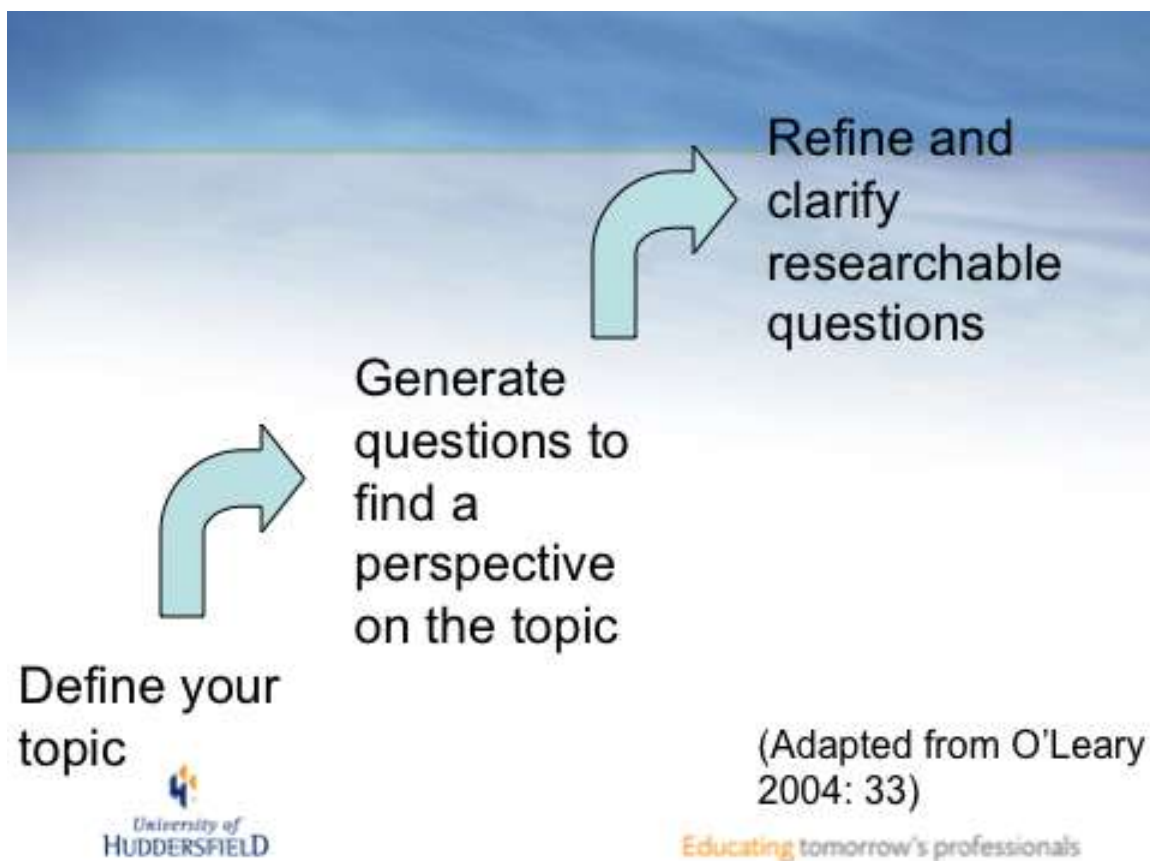
(What is the relationship between policy on widening participation and recruitment on adult vocational courses? Perhaps)

Good research questions will:

- Define the focus of research
- Define the boundaries of research
- Define the direction of research

Above all, the questions will inform the methodology and hence the choice of methods.

So, how do you develop research questions?



Define your topic; then generate questions to find a perspective on the topic; then refine and clarify 'researchable' questions.

[See graphic]

So while refining a research question, try to consider these points:

- Is your question clear?
- Is a response to your question likely to reveal something in relation to your aims?
- Does your question have approval in relation to ethics or institutional permission?

Finally:

- Is responding to your question feasible within the timescale and with the resources available to you?

Suggested further reading

Agee, J., (2009) Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22: 4, 431 — 447

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>

O'Leary, Z., (2004) *The essential guide to doing research*. London: SAGE.

Punch, K., (2009) *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. London: SAGE