

Doing Your Social Science Dissertation

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Chapter 3

Defining the Research Question



Overview

Generating research questions

Finding a topic:

- A course or academic area
- Drawing on life experience
- In the news
- Historical importance
- Eye-witness
- Local issues
- Country or region specific
- Tutor's inspiration
- Cyber inspiration

Turning a topic into a research question: using mind maps

What makes a good research question

Common pitfalls in defining research questions

In this chapter, you will go through the process of selecting a theme or topic, and working it up into a focused manageable and research question. In essence, the issue at hand is how to formulate research problems as lines of inquiry which are possible to research.

We begin by considering ways of generating possible research topics using mind maps and brainstorming, as well as thinking about some of the usual ways in which you might find a dissertation topic. You are then asked to consider the difference between a theme and a research question, and to work more on turning a research *topic* into a research *question*. This is followed by a tips list of common pitfalls in defining a question.

Generating Research Questions: Finding a Theme

There are a number of ways in which you might go about finding a research topic. You could take the opportunity to follow up on an aspect of your course which you have found particularly interesting or intriguing. This might be something that they have already studied in some depth, so it is important to ensure that the work you do for the dissertation builds on this rather than repeats it. However, you may find inspiration from things that are of the moment, for example, burning issues of the day, or new research finding or popular frameworks of beliefs and assumptions which are in circulation which prompt you to inquire further. Alternatively there may be historical events that you would like to explore further. In any event, a starting point is to brainstorm for initial ideas. In the first task (Task 3.1), you are invited to generate a few ideas under every heading.

Good brainstorming is where you:

- Keep coming up with ideas for as long as you can
- As soon as you dry up on one point, move on to the next, and then return later
- Don't evaluate your own or others' ideas: keep moving not thinking
- Write down everything which is suggested, however crazy or irrelevant

Task 3.1

Go Fishing: Brainstorming for Good Ideas

Identify a few ideas under each of the following headings which appeal to you as potential dissertation research projects:

- 1) *A course you have done or academic area which you have encountered*, irrespective of in what depth, which you would like to find out more about. Think concretely about particular hooks, for example, a theory, a situation, a policy, an event etc.
- 2) *Something from your life experience* which raises issues that you could explore: to do with family, work, identity, state of health, finance, housing, travel, fashion, food, your life-long love of Arsenal or Madonna etc.
- 3) *Something in the news*: a policy problem; governance issue; corporate news; something pertaining to a particular sector

such as sport; topical subjects such as social mobility, social exclusion, British identity, the property market, oil and food prices, elections, exam results etc.

- 4) *Career-related subjects*: you could consider how to use the dissertation as part of your professional development or in terms of steps towards a career. This might involve making an inquiry using frameworks found in the social sciences for researching the labour market: looking at the role of professional associations; the link between education, training and occupational status; class systems and the division of labour; ethnographic studies of workplaces; producing a history of a particular organisation; policy areas; investigating the history of a service; user groups; the role of the media (for example, in mental health or crimes); globalisation and work etc.
- 5) *Matters of historical significance*: new data comes to light which raises new questions about the past; are there hidden stories of individuals and communities which could be told?; how things came to be as they are today and/or how historical events affect us in the present.
- 6) *Being an eye-witness*: you could focus on an observation from your everyday life; something you see or have seen. This could include repetitive behaviour (people, systems, structures etc.), or some aspect of attitudes and beliefs which you have observed; it could also involve bearing witness to an extraordinary event or a specific incident (to do with yourself or somebody else).
- 7) *Local issues*: you might like to consider community reactions to proposed developments; the fate of a local institution, for example, the post office or football ground; what is going on with services such as schools, hospitals, shopping, car parking, transport; a local scandal; an event of importance etc.
- 8) *Country or region specific issues*: think of an issue arising in a particular region or state or combinations of states; supra-national and global institutions (EU, NATO); agenda-setting; approaches to problems by policy makers and other actors; the behaviour of individuals, collectives, agencies, partners; media; a particular train of events or process for example, an election; environmental change; conflict; economic change.
- 9) *Your tutor's individual research subjects*: you may find inspiration from your academic tutor in terms of specific research areas that they pursue. Be careful that you don't ask them to choose the area or question for you – while this may seem a tempting and tidy solution to a rather tricky problem, you will find it quite difficult to map your thinking on to someone else's conceptualisation of the problem, however interesting you find it. Work with your tutor to develop your own thinking and choice of area.

Cyber Inspiration

Online sources are the bane and joy of social scientists, young and old. There is a dizzy array of materials now available online. Be inspired by the rich array of data stored in cyberspace. Well-funded and professionally maintained sites are a rich source of great ideas for your project and in due course can also be used as a source in their own right for certain kinds of data. Table 3.1 contains just a snapshot of a few on-line sources: there are many more in Appendix 1, many of which appear later in the book; see for example Chapters 8 and 9, pertaining to collecting quantitative and qualitative data and the variety of secondary sources. But don't be limited by this, think laterally and go your own way.

Table 3.1 Online Sources: Be Inspired

www.gettyimages.co.uk	One million images for your consideration. Can also be purchased at £39 per image
www.medphoto.wellcome.ac.uk	The library of the Wellcome Trust provides thousands of wonderful images. Current categories are: War, Wonderful, Witchcraft, Wellness, World. Collect and download for free
www.iwm.org.uk Collections.iwm.org/server.php?show=nav.oog	The Imperial War Museum in London has partially digitalised its collections. A rich database includes 160,000 personnel records, 10m photographs, 15,000 posters, and many different kinds of other record including, for example, inventories of war memorials
www.loc.gov/index.html	The Library of Congress in the USA has been digitalising its collections since 1994: browse and be happy
www.manchestergalleries.org	The museum and galleries of Manchester and the North West of England have also been busy. Manchester alone has a collection of 30,000 works online There are many smaller museums and galleries which are also well worth browsing online
www.publications.parliament.uk	The United Kingdom parliamentary publications and records office website contains Hansard; archives and records; research papers; committee papers; Commons publications; Early Day

(Continued)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

	Motions; Order Papers. Note: Portcullis is the online catalogue to the 3m historical records of Parliamentary Archives
www.ellisland.org	The Statue of Liberty and the Ellis Island Foundation Inc, have produced an online site for the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, containing all records including narrative documents such as diaries and letters; and data sets and timelines of immigration into the USA. The website includes a passenger name-search facility
www.naa.gov.au	The National Archives of Australia, containing records since 1901
Further hint: Google on 'national archives' to access more countries' records, each in their various stages of digitalisation; try Japan and India	plus many 19th century records transferred from the colonies to the Commonwealth
http://dig.lib.niu.edu/amarch/index.html	Documents of the American Revolution 1774–1776 as collected by Peter Force and published as the American Archives

Developing Your Theme into a Research Question

Generally, start with a broad theme, from which topic areas can be generated. A mind map can be drawn up identifying some possible topics, as for example in Figure 3.1.

From this mind map, a number of topic areas can be derived from the broad theme of 'housing needs for key workers':

- The need for affordable housing within walking distance of the hospital
- The need for affordable and available public transport within a three-mile radius of the school
- The way there is plenty of housing but not the right kind
- Seasonal demand for key workers creates temporary housing needs

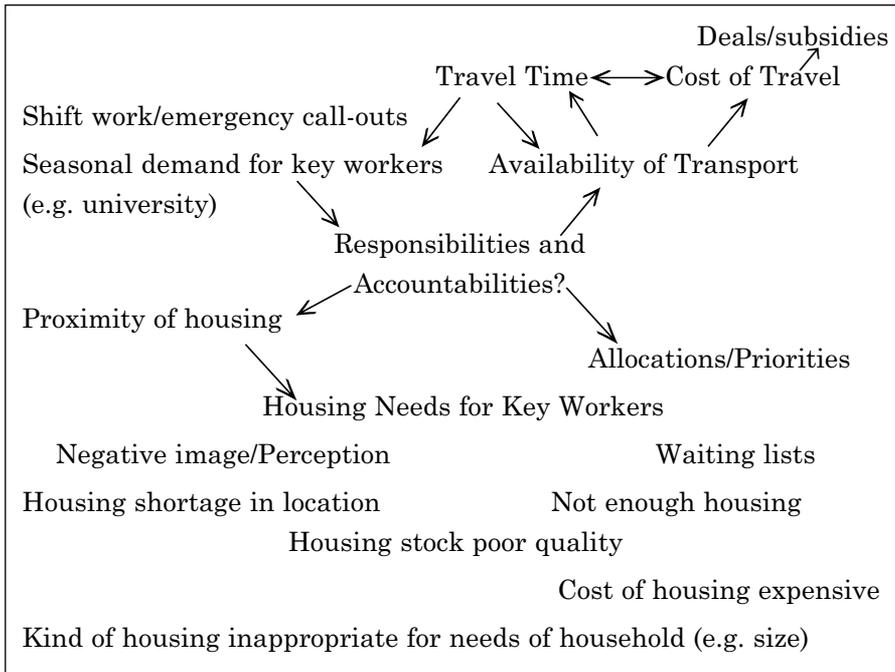


Figure 3.1 Mind Map 1: Housing Needs for Key Workers

In order to refine your mind map, you can group different areas of the map, for example, by using different colour pens and colour coding the themes. You might also want to use images, and other kinds of words, for example, a few headline statistics which seem to you to be especially noteworthy. You will probably fruitfully make a few attempts at creating a mind map, so don't rest on just the first one which you come up with.

In these topics, we can see a number of possible question areas brewing:

- How is housing allocated to key workers, if at all?
- How important is the co-operation of public transport providers and what mechanisms are in place/could be developed?
- How do you persuade key workers to take temporary jobs and temporary accommodation? How does the provision of short-term accommodation affect social cohesion in the neighbourhood?
- Should key workers get the right kind of housing when other citizens do not?
- Who or what is responsible for addressing the problems of housing and key workers?
- How should housing be allocated?

However, while these begin to look like promising question *areas*, none of these are really research *questions*. Some lend themselves to a close description of process or procedures – but they lack critical engagement and are rather large and unwieldy. Others lend themselves to value judgements with no evidential base. Some initial questions might be relatively easy to answer by simply looking up the right source; for example, in this case, looking at statutory duties, policy documentation and undertakings made by organisations as employers, seeking to recruit staff, all gives valuable information as to the prevailing attitudes, norms, and obligations taken up by organisations. A dissertation question needs to explore a specific question which cannot be readily addressed by reference to material which is already in the public domain and which can simply be represented. You may also find that you are exploring an area which has already been researched, possibly recently and in depth. In order to finally decide on a research question, some initial reading around and exploration of websites is essential.

In refining research questions think carefully about what it is about the theme and topic which really interests you. Is it an ethical issue about how values are defined and enshrined in allocation mechanisms in the context of scarce resources? Or is it about really making a difference at the level of policy in practice, for example, how partnerships between local housing suppliers and employers can be negotiated to provide subsidies to the end user?

In any event, further steps are needed to refine the theme into a topic, and from the topic into a question. In order to do this, a second set of maps could be produced. The one in Figure 3.2 shows some of the main decision points which arise in narrowing down the topic into a question. Scoping the sample population is not only a methodological issue, in terms of helping you to work out how you will go about the empirical study, it can be helpful to think about this early on, since it helps to narrow down the area further. In this example of the key workers, rather than attempting to research all key workers everywhere, some selections can be made.

The Great Transformation: Turning Topics into Research Questions

From this, you can begin to refine the question area further. In this example, exploring the housing problems of key workers could be tackled in different ways, for example by demand or supply:

- I am going to explore the needs of junior house doctors who move to Kensington and Chelsea to take up their job and find that they need affordable housing within ten minutes' walk of the main building in which they work, but who cannot access it at this stage in their career, since they are based in one of the most expensive housing areas in the UK

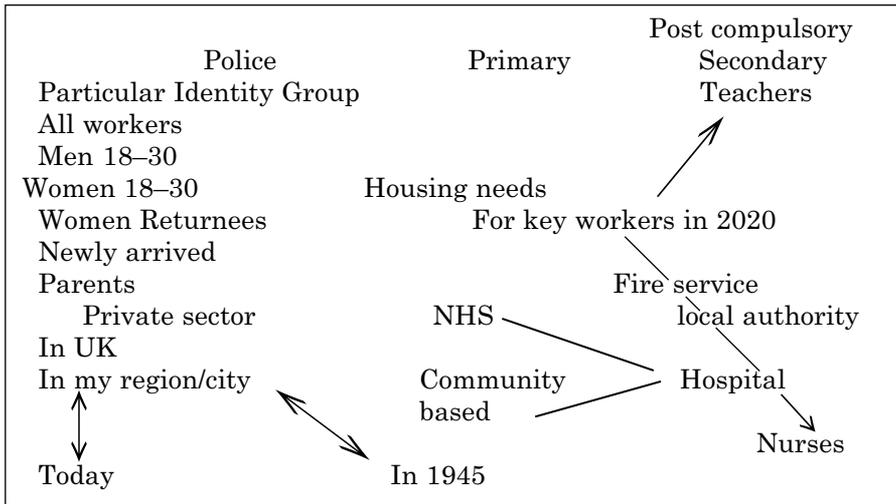


Figure 3.2 Mind Map 2: Housing Needs for Key Workers (2)

- I am going to establish the allocation mechanism for hospital flats, looking for issues connected to processes. For example, positive bias (towards the newly appointed member of staff with relocation needs) and negative bias (such as, race bias in the allocation procedure), and make recommendations for its improvement

By thinking ahead a little to how you might tackle the area, you might be able to further tighten up your research question.

Some Common Pitfalls

1) Too big!

One of the most common pitfalls, with the biggest negative consequences, is to define the research question in ways that are too big.

‘Too big’ means:

- Too broad – the scope of the project is so wide that in fact there is more than one project here. Limit your research question to one main concept or a couple of key variables. Don’t set out to find out everything there is to know
- Too ambitious – while this can be linked to its breadth, too ambitious can also arise given the contexts of the research. This book is for students taking undergraduate degrees, who now need to do their dissertation. Students doing undergraduate degrees face a number of constraints, not least the amount of time they have available; the quality of time available; the money available to pay for any expenses; competing

Good questions are:

- Clear
- Specific
- Answerable
- Interconnected
- Substantially relevant

Figure 3.3 What Makes Good Research Questions?

Source: Punch (2005: 46)

demands on their time and capacity, including their energy, focus, interest, determination; the level and quality of skills and experience gained so far. This rules out some studies, such as longitudinal ones, or which require a large sample and a research team. However, don't avoid being 'ambitious', do talk your ideas over with your class and your supervisor, since there may be a way of dealing with the line of inquiry which makes the project more manageable

Remember: *It is important to recognise the distinctions between the requirements and expectations at different levels of study. Undergraduates are doing undergraduate research, not postgraduate. You are not expected to produce an original contribution to knowledge, nor are you expected to put together and run a research project which spans six countries and requires a team of researchers.*

2) Too vague!

'Too vague' means:

- The research proposed is presented as a topic or theme. Perhaps some work has been done in order to move it towards a research *problem*. But the next vital step is to shape a research *question*: this is a focused, researchable version of the research problem formulation

Ways of dealing with vagueness lie in getting more focused by formulating the problem as a line of inquiry. Tell-tale signs of research questions and titles which are insufficiently focused include the lack of specification of any particular setting, population, area, time frame, body of theory, concepts, variables, phenomena, or in summary, it is hard to tell what the research will actually look at from the phrasing of the question or title. Such vagueness will cloud your judgement when making critical decisions such as those about methodology, and conducting a literature search.

Remember: *Original research and fresh thinking can come from apparently 'small' questions.*

3) The proposed research project will tell us nothing new and is overly descriptive

- This pitfall arises where the student limits themselves to *describing* previous research which has already been done by others

Bringing together research carried out by others is an essential step in your production process, but the dissertation needs to go beyond this. A common but avoidable error is to produce a description of previous work, rather than a critical discussion which goes beyond the work of others. Thus there is the lack of any original element. Under these circumstances, the final dissertation handed in does not meet the mark. Rather, the student has produced an extended essay, albeit in much greater depth and with greater understanding than other coursework which they have previously done.

Remember: *The dissertation must contain an original element. While this can take many forms, including theoretical explorations involving library work, it is not an extended essay or a piece of coursework with extra reading.*

In summary, do not be discouraged from reaching for the stars: just make sure you have enough rocket fuel to get you there – and that you have done the necessary reading and learning, are being realistic about the time and energy you have to bring to the project, and are prepared to take the advice of the supervisor back at base.

Task 3.2

Draft Research Questions: Discussion Points

Working in small groups, consider each student's draft research question in turn.

What suggestions can the group make for:

- (a) Tightening up – making the question more focused
- (b) Adjusting it to better reflect what the student says they want to do
- (c) Next steps – ideas for resources for the student to look at, places to visit, people to talk to?

Summary

- There are a number of ways in which you might identify your research topic:

- A course or academic area
- Drawing on life experience
- In the news
- Historical importance
- Eye-witness
- Local issues
- Country or region specific
- Tutor's inspiration
- Cyber inspiration
- The key challenge is to turn your general research topic into a research question
- What makes a good research question? It is:
 - Clear
 - Specific
 - Answerable
 - Interconnected
 - Substantially relevant
- Some common pitfalls are:
 - It is too big
 - It is too vague
 - It tells us nothing new and is overly descriptive
- Be adventurous – but listen to advice and take time to shape the question

Further Reading

- Clegg, B. and Birch, P. (2007) *Instant Creativity: Simple Techniques to Ignite Innovation and Problem Solving*. London: Kogan Page.
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- Punch, K.F. (2005) Chapter 3, 'Research Questions' (and possibly Chapter 2, 'Some Central Issues'), in *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. London: Sage.
- Walliman, N. (2004) Chapter 3, 'What Will It Be About?' in *Your Undergraduate Dissertation: The Essential Guide for Success*. London: Sage.