REFINING YOUR TOPIC

Once you have read some background information, you can refine your broad research topic into a narrow, focused topic. The sooner you can develop a broad subject into a focused topic, the sooner you can shape your research into a finished paper. On the other hand, if you start out too focused or detailed, you may have a hard time finding enough sources to write an acceptable paper.

Research Tip: A topic is probably too broad if you can state it in four or five words. You can narrow a subject or topic by adding words that will eventually help you make a claim in your thesis statement or help you ask a question if you are developing a research question. Consider using words like conflict, description (describe), contribution (contribute), or development (develop). If you narrow a topic by using nouns derived from verbs, you will be one step closer to a claim that could be challenging enough to keep you and your evaluator interested.

Narrowing a Subject to a Manageable Topic: A topic that covers too much material is a common problem for students. Depending on your interests, a general topic can be focused in many ways. For example, if you want to write a paper on government funding for the arts, consider the following questions:

- What do you already know about this subject?
- Is there a specific time period that you want to cover?
- Is there a geographic region or country on which you would like to focus?
- Is there a particular aspect of this topic that interests you? For example, public policy implications, historical influence, sociological aspects, psychological angles, specific groups or individuals involved in the topic, etc.

Consider creating a table (or grid) to use as a template for narrowing your subject into a manageable topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Subject</th>
<th>Government funding of the arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Span</td>
<td>1930s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event or Aspects</td>
<td>New Deal, painting, art, artists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowed Topic</td>
<td>Federal funding of artists through New Deal programs and the Works Progress Administration contributed to the country’s sense of well-being during the Great Depression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics that are too narrow: Think of parallel and broader associations for your subject if you need a broader topic that will be easier to research. Sometimes a topic may be too new and sources to your research questions may not yet exist.

For example, if you want to do a paper on the effect of deforestation on Colombia's long-term ability to feed its citizens, consider the following questions:

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1 [Source: Richard Montgomery High School. Located in Rockville, MD. Submitted to IBO OCC teacher exchange.]
• Could you examine other countries or regions in addition to Colombia?
• Could you think more broadly about this topic? Give thought to wider topics like agriculture and sustainable development.
• Who are the key players in this topic? The government? Citizens? International organizations?
• What other issues are involved in this topic? For example, how can natural resources be allocated most economically to sustain the populace of Colombia?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Topic</th>
<th>What is the effect of deforestation on Columbia’s long-term ability to feed its citizens?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Focus</td>
<td>Agriculture, sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Place</td>
<td>South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Person or Group</td>
<td>United Nations and its subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Event or Aspect</td>
<td>Birth Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadened Topic</td>
<td>How can the United Nations encourage South American countries to employ sustainable development practices?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Tip:** You have likely narrowed your topic too severely if you cannot easily find resources.

**FROM NARROWED TOPIC TO QUESTION**

Once you determine a topic that you believe to be both interesting and relevant, you’ll be ready to begin the process of searching out specific sources and collecting information. However, you want to avoid simply reporting information, and the best way to do this is to ask questions, to find a purpose for your research. While it is true that you may learn much from seeking out and reporting information, you will nonetheless only be reporting information. IB considers this kind of writing unsuitable for the extended essay. Rather, candidates are expected to examine a problem or issue in depth, adding both analysis and evaluation. If you cannot generate questions worth asking about your topic, then you will be unable to offer any significant answers that might change how you or your readers think about your topic. “Questions are critical because the starting point of good research is always what you do not know or understand but feel you must” (Booth, 1995, p. 39). Having a good set of questions will keep you from getting off track as you search for information.

1. Ask the standard factual questions involving who, what, when, and where. Answers to these questions will provide you and your reader with the necessary background information needed to understand your topic. First off, you should just write out your questions and not worry about answering them. Just ask the questions.

2. Ask interpretive or analytical questions about your topic. These questions will be generated from your information gathering—reading widely on a topic of interest. These are questions that result from your own analysis, critical thinking and wonder. For example, you might consider asking questions that:

| Divide the topic into component parts and evaluate the relationships among them. | What are the different time periods of the cold war and how do they relate to one another? |
| Identify your topic as a component of a larger system. | What role does the cold war play in world history? What role does it have in US history? Who told... |
about the events surrounding the cold war era? Who listened? How does the nationality of the event teller affect the history?

Determine solutions for problems. What role does politics play in solving the world wide AIDS epidemic?

Compare or contrast elements in your topic with one of a similar nature. In what ways do the dramatic arts represent the people of a given country and how does that representation vary worldwide?

Your factual questions—who, what, when, where—are important, but to begin putting together a research question or statement, you’ll need to focus on questions that ask how or why. In other words, you should be looking for a problem. Don’t confuse having a topic with having a problem to solve. If you lack a focus—and certainly questions can help you develop your focus—then you will keep gathering more and more information and not know when to stop. Writing and asking questions that relate to your topic will take you beyond information reporting. To help you through the questioning process, try the exercise on the next page.

PRACTICE EXERCISE: WRITING PURPOSEFUL QUESTIONS

Step 1. Name your topic. Early in your research, describe your work in one sentence. Use adjectives to describe your nouns.

I am learning about (or reading about, or studying) _______________________________.

Example: I am studying public funding for the arts.

Step 2. Suggest a question. Try to describe your research by developing a question that specifies something about your topic.

I am studying _____ because (in order to) I want to find out (who, what, when, where, whether, why, or how) _______________________________.

Example: I am studying public funding for the arts because I want to find out how accessible the arts are to those people who are members of the working poor. Direct Question: How accessible are the arts to people who belong to the class of the working poor?

Step 3. Add a rationale. Take your questioning one step further by adding a second question aimed at determining your rationale.

I am studying ________________ because I want to find out ____________________ in order to understand (how, why, or whether) ___________________.

Example: I am studying public funding for the arts because I want to find out how accessible the arts are to the working poor so I can determine whether our tax dollars support cultural enrichment for all citizens regardless of their socio-economic status. (Note the rephrasing of the purpose stems.)

Direct Question: To what extent do state and federal tax dollars support cultural enrichment for all citizens regardless of their socio-economic status?

Step 4. Repeat the process. Now, repeat steps 1-3 as often as it takes for you to write enough detail to believe in what you are researching, know what you want to find out, and understand your reason for
undertaking your research. Oh—and in between your attempts to work through these steps—have someone read your answers. This will force you to stay on track and keep working.

When you can adequately state the “because I want to find out” portion of your topic, you have determined your reason/purpose for studying and writing about it. Be aware that this is a critical yet difficult step in the research process. You cannot write a full statement of purpose/rationale until you have gathered and read some solid information on your topic. Once you have done so, you’ll almost be ready to write your research question.

HOW TO WRITE THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Refining your Research Question for IB Standards

A good research question is the central element of a well-written paper. It’s a strong question that you can support with evidence or “grounds.” You are likely to offer warrants, those general principles that explain why you think your evidence is relevant to your research question (and perhaps why your readers should believe you and change their way of thinking), and qualifications that will make your question and supporting evidence more detailed and precise. This is an opportunity for you to make connections between published research on your topic and what you think.

A research question is not simplistic. Your research question must be contestable in some way or you cannot proceed until it is. Your research question must lead your readers to think (because they’ve never before thought about your claim) or rethink (because they have long thought about your claim in a different way). Your research question is the product of your own critical thinking after you have done some preliminary research.

There is a difference between a topic and a question.

You may have found your topic, but within that topic you must find a question, identifying what you hope to learn. If your question does not work well, no matter how strong the rest of the essay, the essay is unlikely to be successful. Because of this, it is common to spend more time on the researching, conceptualizing and forming the research question than on any other part of the essay.

Your research question is the most critical part of your research proposal –

- it defines the proposal,
- it guides your arguments and inquiry, and
- it provokes the interests of the reader.

To write a strong research question, consider what interests you.

This is key! The question needs to be one that interests you and is likely to remain intriguing or the duration of the project. There are two traps to be avoided. First, some questions are convenient – the best you can come up with when you are asked to state a question on a form, maybe – or perhaps you decide it will suffice. Second, some questions are fads. (EEs on Da Vinci Code and The Chronicles of Narnia are examples of such fads.) Make sure that you have a real, grounded interest in your research question, and that you can explore this and back it up by academic and intellectual debate. It is your interest that will motivate you to keep working to produce a good extended essay.

Think About it: What animates you? What matters to you?
Listen to yourself and start formulating your question by following your own interests. Remember, you will spend a lot of time researching and writing about the topic: if it does not interest you in the beginning, it will certainly become very difficult to write about in the end.

RESEARCH QUESTION (IB OBJECTIVES 1 AND 2)

The research question must be consistent with the requirements of the Extended Essay. The question must allow you to satisfy the assessment criteria for your chosen subject area. Familiarize yourself with the Assessment Criteria and how your chosen subject area interprets these Assessment Criteria. These Assessment Criteria for the Research Question are listed below:

Students are expected to

1. pursue a research project with intellectual initiation and insight
2. formulate a precise research question.

This criterion assesses the extent to which the purpose of the essay is specified within the research question. In many subjects, the aim of the essay will normally be expressed as a question, and therefore, this criterion is called the “research question”. However, certain disciplines may permit or encourage different ways of formulating the research task.

Achievement Descriptor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>The research question is not stated in the introduction or does not lend itself to a systematic investigation in an extended essay in the subject in which it is registered.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The research question is stated in the introduction but it is not clearly expressed or is too broad in scope to be treated effectively within the word count.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The research question is clearly stated in the introduction and sharply focused, making effective treatment possible within the word limit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STEPS FOR WRITING A STRONG RESEARCH QUESTION:

1. Look at your statement of purpose. If you have a detailed statement of purpose you should have the beginnings of an acceptable research question.
2. Examine the kinds of information you have gathered—pay attention to your notes or highlighted passages in articles and reference materials. Do you have enough evidence to support your purpose?
3. Question the amount of evidence that you have. Do you need more?
4. Decide which question you have the evidence to support. Be sure you can make a strong argument, a strong case for your claim.
5. Write your research question. Consider the following approaches:
   - Define a problem and state your opinion about it
   - Discuss the current state of an issue or problem and suggest/predict how it can be resolved
   - Offer a possible solution to a problem
   - Offer a new perspective on an issue or problem
• Theorize or propose how a situation should be changed or viewed differently
• Compare or contrast
• Offer your ideas how something has been influenced to be the way that it is/was

RESEARCH QUESTION CHECK:

• Is the question relevant to my chosen subject?
• Is it a WHY...or HOW question – not just a WHAT...?
• Does the question lend itself to the use of the concepts, methods, and theories in the chosen subject area?
• Does the question require analysis, discussion, interpretation or evaluation?
• Is the question clearly phrased, sharply focused and unbiased?
• Can the question be effectively treated within the word limit (3500-4000 words)?

Remember: A good research question is the central element of a well-written paper.

It’s a strong question that you can support with evidence or “grounds”, with warrants, those general principal that explain why you think your evidence is relevant to your research question (and perhaps why your readers should believe you and change their way of thinking), and qualifications that will make your question and supporting evidence more detailed and precise.