ACE Quick Guide to Writing a Research Question

What is a Research Question?

A research question is a **clear, succinct 'problem statement'** which outlines the scope and objectives of your project. It should include:

- The **topic** to be investigated
- Your 'thesis' – **what you intend to prove** or disprove
- The **limitations** of your research – what will be excluded from the study

The first step towards writing a research question is therefore selecting an appropriate topic.

How do I Select a Research Topic?

1. Consider the assignment's requirements alongside emerging trends in the field and your personal interests

When selecting an appropriate topic for a work-based project or dissertation, you should **begin by examining the assignment brief** – annotating it with preliminary ideas and questions for your tutor.

Here, you may find it helpful to **consider emerging trends or issues in the wider sector**. To what extent could they positively or negatively impact your organisation? What **solutions** could be implemented to resolve the problems identified? Are there new **initiatives** that could be tested?

Your proposed study should offer an **original contribution** to the field – providing an opportunity to explore your organisation at a higher, strategic level. As such, it is also important to consider your own **interests, experiences**, and **aspirations**.

(Adapted from Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019)

2. Conduct preliminary research

Once you have identified a potential topic, generate a list of keywords and synonyms to **search for literature in academic databases** such as Google Scholar. **Assess the credibility and relevance of potential resources by applying the CRAAP Test** (California State University-Chico, 2010), recording what you have read and where it can be accessed.

Try to locate a wide range of quality resources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters authored by experts in your field.

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3. Evaluate your selected resources, identifying a gap in the existing literature

When evaluating a scholarly resource, you should **ask meaningful questions** – considering its strengths and limitations rather than accepting the information at face value. The descriptive, analytical, and evaluative questions proposed by the **Critical Thinking Model** (University of Leeds, 2023) offer a basic framework.

As your project should offer an original contribution to knowledge, it is important to **identify a gap in the existing literature**. However, approach topics with limited published research with caution as it may be difficult to evidence your conclusions.

4. Reflect on the implications of your proposed study

Your proposed study should offer **meaningful contributions, insights, or recommendations**, so be sure to reflect on the potential implications for your organisation and the industry as a whole.

5. Apply the ACE feasibility checklist

You will also need to consider the feasibility of your project. You can do so by applying the following **checklist** (Adapted from University of Nottingham, 2011):

1. Can I deliver this project in the **time** available?
2. Can I present this study within the **allotted word count**?
3. Can I obtain the **resources** and **data sets** required? For example, interviews with managers and clients.
4. Can I acquire the **skills** needed execute the project in advance of my deadline?

If you still have concerns regarding the feasibility of your study, you may find it helpful to **narrow your focus**. For example:

- Choose a specific geographic location
- Consider a particular group of stakeholders
- Look at one aspect of a wider issue

6. Seek approval from your tutor

Once your topic has been formally approved, you can **begin developing a research question**.
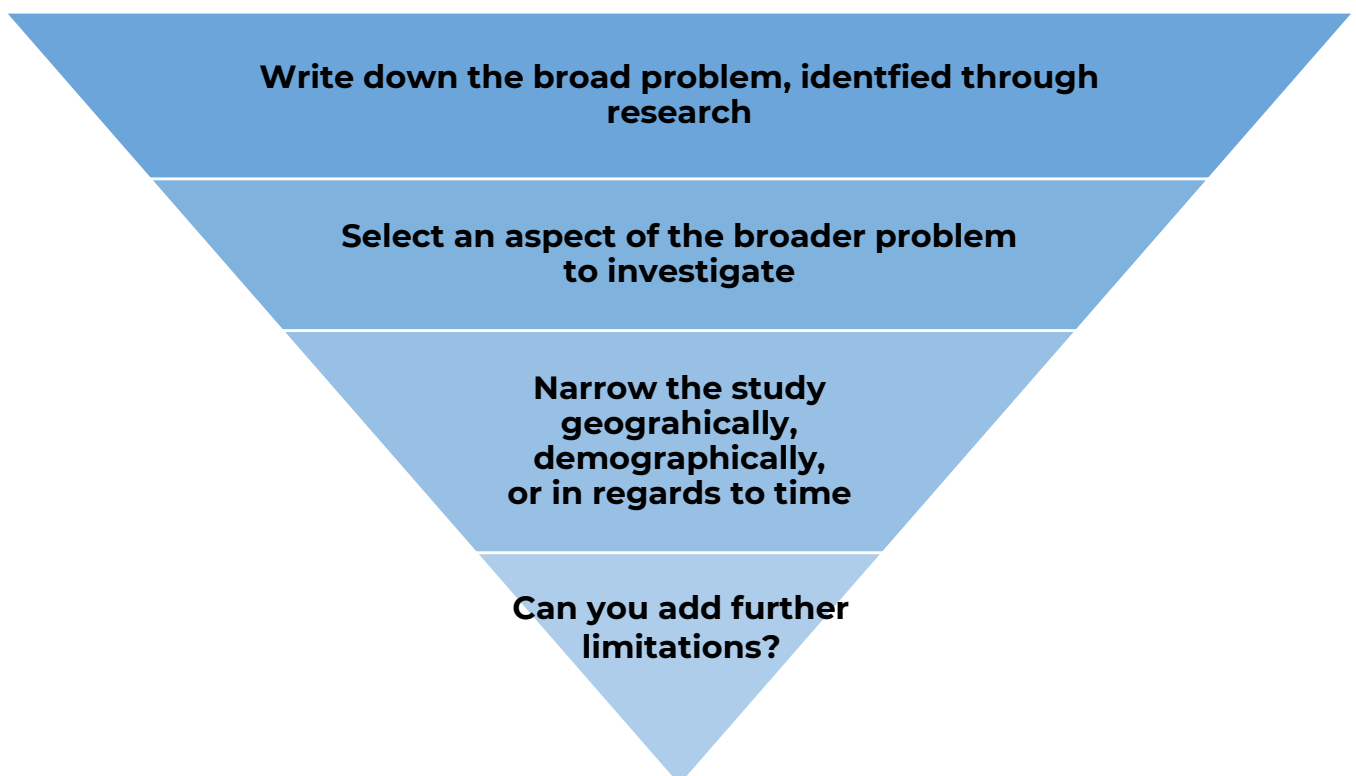
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What are the Features of a Good Research Question?

Relevant	The question should be related to your chosen field, **emerging from current trends or issues within the sector**. It may, for example, reappraise the existing academic or professional consensus, monitor recent changes in practice, or evaluate alternative methodologies.
Manageable	The scope and scale of your project should be **ambitious yet realistic, factoring in the deadline** and word-count. For additional guidance, see the ACE feasibility checklist (p. 2).
Substantial and Original	The question should be **significant** enough for investigation**, fulfilling a gap in the existing literature**.
Focused and Concise	The question should be **clear** and **succinct**; excessively complicated research questions often disguise confusion or indecision, which can lead to an unfocused research process.
Interesting	The topic should align with your professional interests, **granting opportunities for progression and development**. This will motivate you to produce a high-quality study!

How do I Write a Research Question?

Your research question should establish the scope and objectives of your study. As such, it is important to consider the phrasing of your question – clearly and succinctly outlining the 'problem' you will analyse and evaluate.

You can **use the following technique and example to refine your question**:

Write down the broad problem, identfied through research

Select an aspect of the broader problem to investigate

Narrow the study geograhically, demographically, or in regards to time

Can you add further limitations?

How does leadership style impact employee experience?

How does leadership style impact employee satisfaction and retention?

How does leadership style impact employee satisfaction and retention in public sector organisations?

How does leadership style impact employee satisfaction and retention in NHS England?

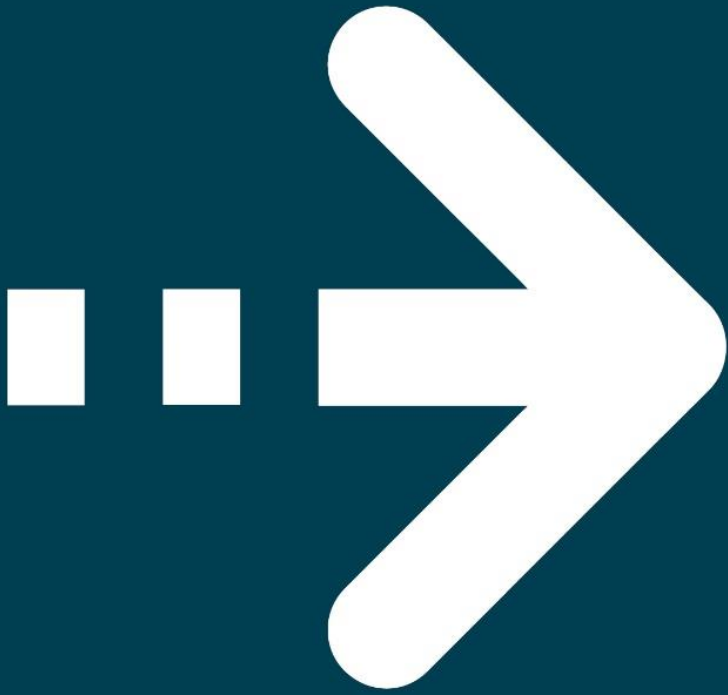**Reference List**

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Manchester Metropolitan University (2019) *Introduction to Work-Based Projects*. Available at: https://www.mmu.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/cmda-introduction-to-work-based-projects.pdf (Accessed: 12 July 2024).

University of Leeds (2023) A Model for Critical Thinking. Available at: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/1401/academic-skills/105/critical-thinking/2 (Accessed: 12 July 2024).

University of Nottingham (2011) *Checklist for Choosing a Topic*. Available at: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studentservices/documents/checklistforchoosingadissertationtopic.pdf (Accessed: 12 July 2024).