

## Five tips for writing a research question

(for undergraduate and graduate students in empirical social science disciplines like sociology, political science, urban studies)

Sukriti Issar

Observatoire Sociologique du Changement (OSC)

Sciences Po, Paris

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The following are five strategies that I have found, over my years of teaching, to be useful for researchers starting out on their research journey. Writing a research question is very important as it guides you in your research and gives you a path to follow. The research question influences the literature you will read and engage with, and the methods or research design you choose. Here are some tips to get started.

1. **Try and link two concepts or phenomena together using X-Y language.** X and Y could represent concepts, processes, phenomena or variables. Many classic research questions are written in this way (e.g., the relationship between democracy and development, factors influencing the transition to capitalism, relationships between childhood events and adolescent achievements). This simple strategy works for qualitative and quantitative research. It allows you to consider competing explanations more easily and look for disconfirming evidence, thus making your argument stronger.
  - a. The X-Y logic helps as it makes it easy to think of competing explanations (that is, the explanations that are the alternatives to your argument). For example, the competing explanations to  $X \rightarrow Y$  is that there is no relationship between the two, that Y leads to X (reverse causality), that there is endogeneity (need to consider timing and temporality), a third factor Z affects both and so on.
2. **Think about mechanisms:** what are the mechanisms that link X and Y? Although there is plenty of disagreement and debate about what mechanisms are, I will put together various definitions and say that mechanisms are empirically generalizable bits of theory, nuts and bolts, how things happen, empirical traces of causal

hypotheses, diagnostic pieces of evidence etc.

- a. X-Y and mechanism based thinking is also useful for reading the literature. Look for how authors frame their questions and arguments, what kind of mechanisms they put forth, and what kind of empirical evidence they put together for supporting those arguments. This is also a way to write research questions – by looking at the literature in your field and analysing what questions are focused on.

3. **Link your case to broader questions:** Use the words ‘more broadly’ or ‘more specifically’ to link a more precise and empirically-grounded question to a broader and more conceptual question. The ‘more broadly’ question is a way to link a more empirical, case-based question to a broader, conceptual question. The ‘more specifically’ question is a way to link a more theoretical and conceptual question to your case. Here is an example: ‘In this paper / thesis, I explore / study / investigate / analyse how social movements impact the policy-making process. *More specifically*, I study how the rise of the Tea Party after the election of Barack Obama influenced healthcare policy in the United States.’
4. **The question is not about you:** Try to shift from a ‘what is X’ to a ‘how do stakeholders consider X’ question. The reason for this is twofold. First, many sociological and political questions are inherently about politics, that is, about the differing values, opinions and powers of different groups (think of Bourdieu’s idea of fields, positions, capitals). Focusing on the ‘what is X’ question can sometimes feel like a trap – you feel compelled to give a definitive answer to the question, and resolve long-standing conflicts once and for all. The more productive strategy might be to identify the differences of opinion, the conflicts, and the stakes of the question. Second, such an analytical move is a way to *decenter* yourself from the enquiry. The aim of the research is not for you to represent your own political opinion – although it might be a good side-product that you might better understand the issue and hence identify your own political position. However, identifying or expressing your political opinion is not the purpose of empirical social science research.
  - a. Consider an example. You might be interested in how public housing is allocated to eligible residents. You ask yourself ‘how *should* governments allocate housing in the most efficient / best / equitable way?’ The word ‘should’ signals that this is a normative question and not yet an empirical

research question. In many cities, this is likely to be a question about which there is conflict, and different actors or stakeholders put forward different positions. So, to convert this normative question into a research question, you can ask ‘how do the different actors think about / advocate for / strategize / frame eligibility for public housing’. Or ‘I am interested in how public housing is allocated. To answer this question, I will study the case of Housing Centre X and investigate how the different stakeholders have implemented and framed allocation of public housing’.

5. **Focus on empirics over normative questions:** Avoid normative language, or forward looking questions (e.g. what *should* be done... how *can* we open up possibilities...). Such a question could be very important for a pressing social problem – it is not however amenable to social science research unless reframed. Since such questions do not easily lend themselves to empirical work, they are likely to create confusion. Instead, follow the first four steps to aim for a question that is more empirically oriented, and that can be answered using evidence.