Developing Your Research Question and Writing a Good Research Proposal
Developing Your Research Question

http://www.uk.sagepub.com/resources/oleary/olearychapter03.ppt

There seems to me a 2nd ed. O'Leary, Z. (2010) *The essential guide to doing your research project.*
From an interesting topic to a specific, researchable question
A Good Research Question:

• Provides direction
  – it’ll point you towards the theory you need to explore, the literature you need to review, the data you need to gather, the methods you need to use… and to some sort of answer

• Is neither too broad nor too narrow

• Sets boundaries
  – what does X have to do with my question?
Where Questions Come From

An ‘angle’ for your research can come from:

• personal experience
• theory
• observations
• contemporary issues
• engagement with the literature.
Knowing the Literature

Your research should be well grounded in current theoretical and empirical knowledge: know the literature.

• But which literature?
• What about ‘gaps’ in the literature?
• Debates, disagreements, controversies?
Refining and Clarifying

• Narrowing, clarifying and even redefining your question is essential to the research process.

• Coming up with the ‘right’ question should be seen as an ongoing process that is constantly informed by reading and doing.
Cycles of Research Question Development
The Hypothesis Dilemma

• Hypotheses are designed to express relationships between variables. If this is the nature of your question, a hypothesis can add to your research.

• If your question is more descriptive or explorative, generating a hypothesis may not be appropriate.
The Hypothesis Dilemma

An hypothesis may *not* be appropriate if:

- You do not have a hunch or educated guess about a particular situation
- You do not have a set of defined variables (you might want to explore things rather than test a hypothesis)
- Your question centres on phenomenological description
- Your question requires ethnographic study
- Your aim is to engage in, and research, the process of collaborative change.
Good Question Checklist

✓ Is the question right for me?

- Will the question hold my interest?
- Can I manage any potential biases I may have?
Good Question Checklist

✓ Is the question well articulated?

- Are the terms well-defined?
- Are there any unchecked assumptions implicit in my question?
Good Question Checklist

✓ Does the question get the tick of approval from those in the know?
  
  ▪ Do ‘experts’ in the field think my question is important?
  ▪ What about scholars in related fields?
  ▪ Endusers?
Good Question Checklist

✓ Is the question right for the field?

- What will we learn that we don’t already know?
- Will the findings be significant?
- What contribution will my research make?

So what?
Good Question Checklist

✓ Is answering my question doable?

- How will I go about answering my question? Methods?
- Is the information I will need to answer my question actually collectable?
- Do I have the skills and expertise necessary to do the research?
- Will I be able to get it all done within my time constraints?
- Are the costs likely to exceed my budget?
- Are there any potential ethics problems?
Research Proposals

• Things to think about…
Different Funder – Different Question

- Marsden Fund – advancing knowledge
- REG/URF – uni strategic priorities
- Ako Aotearoa – enhancing the effectiveness of tertiary teaching and learning
- TLRI – improving outcomes for learners
- Spencer – making education better
- MoE – sets its own questions
Stuff to Cover

- Your question
- Background (but not too much)
- Methods
- Outputs/outcomes
- Importance
Communicate

• Explain what you are going to do and why it matters
• Write clearly but with authority
• Demonstrate your knowledge
Audience

• Who are you writing for?

• If not for specialists, then:
  - assume they do not know your field
  - assume they don’t care about your project
  - hook them … and convince them

(Probably good advice even if you are writing for specialists)
Writing Tips

• Drafts (4-hour technique) – give your drafts to others to read (friends, family …)
• “I …” (or “we …”)
• Short sentences
• No jargon
• Make every sentence count (no waffle, no repetition, nothing vague)
• “will” not “might”
• Blank space
• Story
• Passion
• Personality