RESEARCH GUIDE: Developing a research question

A research question is a concise question which expresses what the research project aims to find out. It is crucial to have a clearly defined research question before starting to collect your data, as it will give the structure and focus necessary to get meaningful and useful results.

Decide on a general research focus or topic

Get to know the topic -

what has already been done?

You can help identify what you want to do by identifying 'gaps', and questions that have not already been answered by previous research

- Do a 'scoping search' on the internet or in your organization's library
- Ask colleagues if they know anything about the subject
- Look at previous studies in your topic area

Consider the <u>purpose</u> of your research, as this will influence the style of the research question

- **Exploratory** or **descriptive** research looks at and describes what is happening in a situation
- **Explanatory** research aims to explain a situation or problem, and sometimes identifies causal relationships

Ask relevant people what they think the questions should be,

for example practitioners in the field - the people that will be <u>using</u> the research

Refine your general focus down to a specific research question (or questions)

- You can address more than one research question in your study
- If you have more than one question you can group and sub-group them; this may help identify the one or two most important questions to answer

A good question will include explicitly:

- The **population** that you are interested in, often a group of service users (e.g. older people)
- The **intervention** you are investigating (eg Reablement, Single Assessment Process) if appropriate
- An indication of whether the study is **exploratory** (eg 'What is the experience of…' or **explanatory** (eg 'What is the impact of x on y'?)

It may also define a **timeframe** that the research is looking at, as well as a geographical or organisational **setting**

Ensure that your question is:

- **Clear and simple –** It must be unambiguous and easy for others to understand
- **Interesting** – If the question really interests you, it will help you to stay motivated
- **Specific** – It must be easy to define what will constitute an answer to your question
- **Answerable** – Ensure that you can understand what data you will need to answer your question, and that this is possible to gather
- **Relevant** – Try to design a worthwhile question that will contribute something new to the topic area

Ensure you avoid:

- Defining a question where you do not have the time and/or resources to answer it
- Restricting yourself to certain methods before you have identified your question – DO let your question influence your methods
- Selecting an unanswerable question
- Repeating work that has already been done – ie if a question has already been answered satisfactorily by a previous study

Finally, revisit your question, and clarify the purpose of your research

Does the question ask what you need it to?

Can it be answered?

A final note

research in practice *for adults'* has based this guide on learning from our own experience of social research. If you would like further detail on any aspect of this guide, please visit our website or contact **research in practice *for adults*** on 01803 869753 or at info@ripfa.org.uk.

Further reading

Robson C (2002) *Real World Research*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell