

Defining A Research Question

Collecting information about an assigned topic is usually pretty simple. However, a simple collection of facts will not produce a good research paper. In order to be useful, research must be organized around a research question. If you do not have a research question, then the information you find will have no purpose or direction.

Questions that ask WHO, WHERE, or WHEN about specific facts, like the questions below, do not usually make good research questions.

*Who discovered the moons of Jupiter?
Where did Galileo present his argument for why the earth moves?
When did the Catholic Church declare Galileo's theories to be heresy?*

These questions can be answered with simple facts: names, places and dates. Although facts can be useful for satisfying curiosity or passing a test, they are not worth very much by themselves. If your question has a simple answer, it is probably too simple of a question.

However, those specific answers can be used to build more interesting questions: questions that start with WHY and HOW and WHAT.

*Why was the discovery of moons around another planet significant?
How did Galileo offend Pope Urban VIII?
What was the scientific reason that scientists still thought the earth was the center of the solar system?*

Better questions require longer answers—the kind you might need to write on a test—but these still are not developed enough to serve as research questions. Research questions ask more than what happened or how it happened or why it was significant; they give us a purpose for research. Research questions ask, What if all these questions and answers are considered as part of a single problem?

*Based on the available research, how should people understand the significance of the various reactions the Roman Catholic Church had to Galileo's writings?
Based on the available research, what should people do to prevent misunderstandings between religion and science?
Based on the available research, what can be learned about the history of science that will help advance science today?*

Your research question will serve as the **purpose** for your assignment. The answer to your research question will eventually become your thesis or primary argument. Do not be alarmed if the process of selecting a research question changes the way you think. That is part of writing!

See also Chapter 1 of *A Manual for Writers* by Kate L. Turabian, 7th Edition © 2007 University of Chicago Press.