

How to Develop A Research Question

A strong research project begins with a strong research question. Your research question identifies what you want to investigate and gives your project a clear direction. It helps determine what information you need, what sources you should look for, and what data you may need to collect or analyze.

Developing a research question does not mean that you need to know exactly what you want to study from the beginning. Most research questions start with a broad area of interest and become more specific as you learn about the topic.

1. Start With a Topic That Interests You

Begin by choosing a general topic that you would like to learn more about. For economic research, this could be an economic issue, trend, policy, or behavior that interests you.

Some possible topics include:

- Inflation
- Unemployment
- Minimum wage
- Housing costs
- Income inequality
- Consumer spending
- International trade
- Interest rates

At this stage, your topic does not need to be specific. The goal is simply to identify an area that you would be interested in exploring further.

2. Explore Your Topic

Before deciding on your final research question, spend some time learning about your topic.

Look at articles, previous research, economic reports, and available data.

As you explore, pay attention to patterns, changes, disagreements, or relationships that you find interesting.

For example, suppose you are interested in **inflation**. During your initial research, you might notice discussions about inflation and:

- Consumer spending
- Food prices
- Housing costs
- Wages
- Interest rates

Instead of trying to study inflation as a whole, you can choose one of these relationships to investigate.

Preliminary research can also help you determine whether enough reliable information and data exist to support your project.

3. Turn Your Topic Into a Question

Once you have identified a specific area of interest, turn it into a question that your research can investigate.

Consider the difference between these examples:

Topic:

Inflation

Area of Interest:

Inflation and consumer spending

Possible Research Question:

- How does inflation affect consumer spending in the United States?

The final version gives the researcher something specific to investigate rather than simply describing a broad economic topic.

Useful ways to begin an economic research question include:

- How does ____ affect ____?
- What is the relationship between ____ and ____?

- To what extent does ____ influence ____?
- How has ____ changed over time?
- How does ____ differ between two groups or locations?
- What factors contribute to ____?

These formats are starting points. Your final question should reflect the specific issue you want to investigate.

4. Narrow Your Question

A research question can still be too broad even after it has been turned into a question.

Narrowing the question makes the project more manageable and allows you to conduct a more focused analysis.

You can make a question more specific by considering:

Location: What country, state, city, or region are you studying?

Time Period: Are you interested in a particular year or range of years?

Population: Are you studying all consumers, college students, teenagers, households, workers, or another group?

Variables: What specific economic factors or outcomes are you comparing?

Consider this progression:

Broad:

How does unemployment affect the economy?

More Focused:

What is the relationship between unemployment and consumer spending in the United States?

More Specific:

What was the relationship between unemployment and consumer spending in the United States from 2020 to 2024?

Each revision gives the research project a clearer scope.

5. Make Sure Your Question Requires Analysis

A research question should lead to investigation and analysis rather than a simple factual answer.

For example:

Too Simple:

What was the U.S. unemployment rate in 2024?

This information can be found by looking up a single statistic.

Better:

What was the relationship between unemployment and consumer spending in the United States from 2020 to 2024?

A useful test is to ask yourself:

Can my question be answered with one fact or a quick search?

If the answer is yes, the question probably needs to be developed further.

6. Check Whether Your Question Is Researchable

An interesting question is not always a practical research question. Before committing to your topic, make sure you can realistically investigate it.

For economic research, consider whether:

- Reliable information about the topic is available.
- Economic data related to your question can be found.
- The variables you want to study can be measured.
- Previous research exists that can provide background and context.
- The project can be completed with the time and resources available to you.

Checking for data early is especially important. You do not want to build an entire project around a question only to discover later that the information needed to answer it is unavailable.

7. Common Mistakes to Avoid

Choosing a Topic That Is Too Broad

Trying to research something like the U.S. economy or income inequality as a whole can make it difficult to create a focused project. Narrow the topic to a particular relationship, population, location, or period.

Asking a Question That Is Too Simple

Avoid questions that can be answered with a definition, a single statistic, or yes/no answer. Your question should give you something to investigate.

Trying to Study Too Many Factors

Adding too many variables can make a project difficult to manage. Focus on the factors that are most important to your question.

Assuming the Answer

A research question should allow the evidence to guide your conclusion. Avoid wording the question in a way that assumes a particular result before you conduct the research.

Ignoring Data Availability

A question may sound interesting but be difficult to investigate if reliable data cannot be found. Check possible data sources before finalizing your question.

8. Review Your Final Question

Before beginning your project, review your research question one last time.

Ask yourself:

- Is my question clearly written?
- Is it specific enough?
- Does it require research and analysis?
- Have I identified what I actually want to investigate?
- Can I find reliable sources related to it?
- Can I find the data needed to answer it?
- Is the project realistic with the time and resources I have?
- Am I interested enough in the question to spend time researching it?

If you can answer **yes** to these questions, you are ready to move forward with your research.

From Topic to Research Question: Example

Here is an example of how an economic research idea can develop:

General Topic

Minimum wage

Area of Interest

Minimum wage and employment

Narrowed Topic

Minimum wage and teenage employment

Research Question

What is the relationship between increases in the minimum wage and teenage employment rates in the United States?

Your first idea does not need to become your final research question. Research is a process, and your question may change as you discover new information. The goal is to develop a question that is focused, researchable, and interesting enough to guide the rest of your project.