

# Refining Your Research Questions

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Evaluate your research question using these four criteria:

*Does your research question **ADDRESS YOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTION?***

Because you are driving towards our exhibition, your research question must help to answer the larger essential question of your exhibition group.

*Is your research question **CLEAR?***

With so much research available on any given topic, research questions must be as clear as possible in order to be effective in helping the writer direct his or her research.

*Is your research question **FOCUSED?***

Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.

*Is your research question **COMPLEX?***

Research questions should not be answerable with a simple “yes” or “no” or by easily-found facts. They should, instead, require both research and analysis on the part of the writer.

## Evaluate:

Based on your current question and these four criteria:

1. Which criteria is weakest for your question right now? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Which criteria is strongest for your question right now? Explain.

## Sample Research Questions

**Essential Question:** How is social class experienced in our community?

**Not Connected to Essential Question:** *What affordable housing options exist in Durango?*

**Connected to Essential Question:** *Are there stronger communities in wealthy neighborhoods or in affordable housing developments in Durango?*

The non-connected version of this question raises a factual question, but does not actually speak to the different experiences of social class in Durango that the essential question is driving towards. The connected version still focuses on affordable housing, but asks the researcher to dig more deeply into a specific type of experience, and to evaluate neighborhoods based on those experiences.

**Unclear:** *Why is there more poverty in more rural areas?*

**Clear:** *What are the poverty rates of different areas in La Plata County, and what explanations are there for any differences in those rates?*

The unclear version of this question doesn't specify what areas they are looking at, or how poverty will be measured. It also assumes that there is more poverty in rural areas, which may or may not be the case. A strong research question should never leave room for ambiguity or interpretation.

**Unfocused:** *How much social mobility is there in our region?*

**Focused:** *What factors make a town more likely to foster increased social mobility, and to what extent do different towns in La Plata County have these factors?*

The unfocused research question is so broad that it couldn't be adequately answered in a book-length piece, let alone a standard college-level paper. It also has undefined terms and no clear way to draw a conclusion. The focused version narrows down to a specific region (La Plata County), and establishes evaluation criteria (the factors identified in the first part of the question). When in doubt, make a research question as narrow and focused as possible.

**Too simple:** *What programs are there in Durango to support students from low-income families in furthering their education?*

**Appropriately Complex:** *What struggles do low-income students face in the Durango public school system, and are existing programs adequately addressing these struggles?*

The simple version of this question can be looked up online and answered in a list of bullet points; it leaves no room for analysis. The more complex version is thought provoking and requires both significant investigation and evaluation from the writer. As a general rule of thumb, if a quick Google search can answer a research question, it's likely not very effective.

# Research Question Refinement

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**Essential Question:**

**My Research Question:**

***Please consider the following in your comments:***

- 1. Is the question clear, focused, and complex?*
- 2. Does the question help to answer their research question?*
- 3. Is it important enough to warrant research and discussion?*
- 4. What kinds of sources and research methods would be useful in answering this question?*
- 5. Are there ways to make this question more interesting and engaging?*

**Comments:**

**AFTER you read through all the comments...write your NEW, REFINED, research question on the back of this paper, and come show Lori!**

**Refined Research Question:**

**Got Lori's approval? Put it in the online document linked in Lori's DP.**