

What Is Your Research Question?

Postgraduates often become *busy* with doing their research (experiments, measurements, surveys and everything else) before they have a clear idea of what is the overall aim or purpose of their research project.

In our opinion, research questions fall into one of three categories:

1. **Exploration/Description:** *what* happens in given conditions?
2. **Explanation:** *why* or *how* does something happen?
3. **Application:** *how* can knowledge or information be used in some way?

So the first question Ted asks postgraduates is:

"What is the aim or purpose of your research project?"

If they look at him blankly or ask what he means, then he asks:

"What will you have to show if you are successful?"

Ted usually gets one of three responses:

1. They imitate a fish breathing.
2. They tell him all the things they are *doing* or going to do.

After the long list of activities, Ted asks them *why* they are *doing* all these things and then they resort to the fish-breathing imitation. To help them out, he asks if they are trying to:

- ☐ Find what happens or if something happens? (Exploration)
 - ☐ Explain why or how something happens? (Explanation)
 - ☐ Decide if (...) is feasible/possible? (Application)
 - ☐ Use what is known to (...)? (Application)
3. They give Ted a collection of apparently disconnected questions they want to answer. So he asks:
 - ☐ Do these questions have a common aim or theme?
 - ☐ Are these questions part of a larger question/problem?
 - ☐ Can these questions be grouped into larger categories or classes?

Once the postgraduate students have clarified the aim of their research project, then Ted asks them to explain why this is important.

- Why do we need to know what happens?
- Why do we need to explain why or how (...) happens?
- Why do we need something which does (...)?
- How is (...) worthwhile?

In one workshop, a postgraduate student came up to Ted at the coffee break and said that she didn't have a research question but the *subject* of her research was eco-tourism. So he asked "Who cares about eco-tourism?"

This then provoked a vigorous explanation about how the increasing levels of tourism were affecting the environment and the tourist sites themselves. There were increasing levels of pollution from the air travel and the sites of historical interest or natural beauty were being eroded from the thousands to millions of visitors!

Ted then said "So it's a problem. So what?"

She responded that the world needed ecologically/environmentally responsible tourism, but no one even knew if such a thing was possible. [Bingo – the primary research question had surfaced!] And if ecologically responsible tourism was possible, then how could it be implemented? [A follow-up question had appeared!]

At this point he asked if she had noticed how she had just identified the **problem**, its **importance** and the principal **research questions** that she wanted to answer with respect to that problem.

NOTE

- A serious weakness in a thesis is the lack of a clear thread or theme – it reads like a collection of results with nothing tying it all together. This is why defining your research question is so important.
- Your research question defines the information that is relevant, necessary and sufficient to answering it convincingly.
- Explaining why your research question is useful will require defining the larger context in which the research fits.
- You are awarded an advanced degree because your research is **relevant, novel, meaningful** and **useful**. You won't be awarded your degree simply because you showed up and were busy.