

Finding a Genuine Research Gap

An evidence-led method for recognising what remains unknown, uncertain, contested or insufficiently explained - and deciding whether it is worth investigating.

EXPLANATIONS / EXAMPLES / PRINTABLE TOOLS

What is a research gap?

A gap is a reasoned claim, not just an empty search result.

A research gap is a meaningful limitation in what the available evidence, explanations, methods or perspectives currently establish about a question. It may concern missing evidence, inconsistent findings, an untested assumption, an overlooked context or a problem that existing work has not adequately addressed.

THE CORE DISTINCTION

An under-researched topic describes a quantity of available work. A research gap explains what is not yet adequately known and why that uncertainty matters.

A useful gap statement answers four questions

1. What do we already know?

Describe established findings or a well-supported consensus.

2. What remains uncertain?

Name the missing, weak, disputed or context-dependent knowledge.

3. Why does that matter?

Explain the intellectual or practical consequence of the uncertainty.

4. What can your study contribute?

Describe a feasible way of producing relevant evidence.

Working formula: Existing research shows [what is known], but [specific uncertainty] remains because [evidence-based reason]. Understanding this matters for [consequence]. This study therefore examines [focused question].

What is NOT a research gap?

Common shortcuts that are not sufficient on their own.

“No one has studied this.”

A search may be incomplete, use different terminology or overlook adjacent disciplines. An absence claim needs a transparent search.

“The topic is new or trending.”

Novelty is not the same as significance. Explain the unresolved question created by the new context.

“Studies disagree.”

A disagreement may reflect different populations, measures or designs. Identify what specifically explains or persists behind the disagreement.

“This country has not been studied.”

A new location alone is weak justification. Show why the context could change mechanisms, outcomes or applicability.

“The paper recommends more research.”

An author's suggestion is a lead, not proof. Check subsequent studies and evaluate the limitation independently.

Where gaps can appear

These categories are lenses, not a mandatory classification.

Evidence gap

Relevant observations, measures or populations have not been adequately examined.

Inconsistency gap

Credible studies reach conflicting conclusions that require explanation.

Methodological gap

Existing methods or measures leave key assumptions or phenomena insufficiently addressed.

Context / transferability gap

Findings are established in one setting but their applicability in a substantively different setting is uncertain.

Theoretical / explanatory gap

Available theories do not adequately explain an observed pattern or mechanism.

Practice / implementation gap

There is uncertainty about how an established insight operates under real constraints.

From broad topic to gap

Illustrative example, not a claim about the actual literature.

BROAD TOPIC

Use of digital learning platforms among postgraduate students.

INITIAL OBSERVATION

Some studies report engagement gains; others identify difficulties with sustained participation.
(Hypothetical pattern for teaching.)

WHAT TO CHECK IN THE LITERATURE

Are engagement and participation defined alike? Are study settings comparable? Does access, course design or discipline explain differences?

DEFENSIBLE GAP HYPOTHESIS

It remains unclear how course design and connectivity constraints jointly shape sustained participation in a specified postgraduate setting.

FOCUSED RESEARCH QUESTION

How do course design and connectivity constraints relate to sustained participation among postgraduate students using a specified digital platform?

Build an evidence trail

A gap claim should be traceable to the sources reviewed.

1. State a provisional question

Write the phenomenon, context, possible relationship and target group.

2. Generate search terms

Include synonyms, alternate terminology, related concepts and disciplinary variants.

3. Search multiple relevant sources

Use databases, research repositories, reviews and citation chains suited to the field.

4. Prioritise synthesis

Find recent systematic or narrative reviews where appropriate, then inspect relevant primary studies.

5. Track contrasts and limitations

Record findings, methods, samples, measures, locations and contradictory results.

6. Update the claim

Search forward from key publications and check whether the proposed gap has already been addressed.

TIP: Record search dates, databases, search strings and screening decisions.

Compare what studies establish

Use one row per study or review.

SOURCE	QUESTION	EVIDENCE	LIMITATION	RELEVANCE

After reviewing, write the cross-study pattern:

Do not confuse a limitation in one paper with a field-wide gap. Look for patterns across a defensible body of relevant literature.

Is the proposed gap worth pursuing?

Score each test from 0 (weak) to 2 (strong).

Grounded

0 1 2

Supported by a transparent and reasonably current evidence search.

Specific

0 1 2

Identifies a clear uncertainty rather than an entire topic.

Significant

0 1 2

Explains the scholarly or practical consequence of addressing it.

Original contribution

0 1 2

Offers a credible increment to existing knowledge, not merely repetition.

Feasible

0 1 2

Can be investigated with accessible data, time, skills and permissions.

Ethically defensible

0 1 2

Can be studied responsibly with suitable consent, privacy and safeguards.

TOTAL: ____ / 12

Interpretation: This is a reflection tool, not a validated measurement scale. A low score identifies an issue to resolve; a high score does not automatically establish a research contribution.

What is the weakest part of your current gap claim?

Write your gap statement

Complete each prompt in your own words.

My broad research area

What the literature currently establishes (with key sources)

The precise uncertainty, contradiction or limitation

Why this uncertainty matters

What my study can feasibly contribute

From gap to research question

A practical finishing checklist and publication pathway.

Draft a one-paragraph gap statement

Write your proposed research question

Before you proceed, verify:

- ☐ I can cite evidence for what is already known.
- ☐ I checked recent publications and relevant synonyms.
- ☐ My claim is narrower than “no studies exist”.
- ☐ The gap matters beyond simple novelty.
- ☐ My question, design and feasible evidence align.
- ☐ I can explain ethical and practical constraints.

Suggested next step: Discuss the gap statement with a supervisor or research mentor and revise it after targeted reading. Cross-link this guide with the SRS Insight “What Exactly Is a Research Gap?” and the Research Question Formulation Worksheet.

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