

Research Question Formulation Worksheet

From an interesting topic to a focused, researchable question.

Purpose

Use this worksheet to clarify what you want to investigate, why it matters, what evidence you would need and whether your question is realistic. You should finish with one provisional research question you can discuss with a supervisor or mentor.

How to use this worksheet

Work through the six stages in order. Write rough answers first, then refine them. You do not need to know your final research method at the outset.

Estimated time: 30–45 minutes | Best for: undergraduate projects, postgraduate dissertations, doctoral proposals and independent research.

The route

01 Topic	02 Problem	03 Focus
04 Feasibility	05 Question	06 Quality check

A topic is not yet a research question.

“Social media and students” names an area. “How do first-year university students describe the influence of short-form video use on their study routines?” identifies a population, phenomenon and investigative direction. This example is illustrative; its method and feasibility still need evaluation.

01 / TOPIC AND CURIOSITY

Start with what interests you

Describe the broad area you want to study without worrying about perfect wording.

My broad research topic

Use a short phrase, not a full sentence.

What specifically interests or puzzles me about this topic?

Describe an observation, contradiction, uncertainty or issue.

Who or what does this topic concern?

Consider the people, communities, organisations, texts, places, events or processes involved.

Checkpoint

Can you explain your research interest in two sentences to someone outside your field? If not, narrow the topic before moving ahead.

02 / THE PROBLEM

Identify what needs understanding

A research problem is not simply a topic that has been insufficiently discussed. Describe the uncertainty or issue you want the study to address.

What is presently unclear, contested or inadequately explained?

Be specific. Avoid claiming that “no research exists” before reviewing relevant literature.

Why is this worth investigating?

Think about intellectual, social, practical or theoretical significance.

What do I already know, and what do I still need to verify?

Separate evidence from assumptions.

A useful distinction

Broad concern: Students use AI tools.

Researchable problem: We need to understand how a defined group of students evaluates the reliability of AI-generated citations in academic assignments.

03 / DEFINE THE BOUNDARIES

Make the study more focused

Decide which part of the problem you can meaningfully study.

Population, material or unit of analysis

Who or what will you investigate?

Context or setting

Where, in which discipline, institution, community or situation?

Key concept, experience, behaviour or relationship

What precisely would be explored, compared, interpreted or assessed?

What will this study deliberately exclude?

A focused project cannot answer every related question.

Focus test

Replace vague words such as “impact,” “effective,” “awareness,” or “role” with specific meanings. Ask what observations or evidence would support an answer.

04 / FEASIBILITY AND EVIDENCE

Can the question be answered?

A worthwhile question still needs an ethically and practically feasible design.

What evidence might answer this question?

Interviews, surveys, observations, documents, existing datasets, experiments, archival material, textual analysis, etc.

What access, skills or permissions would I need?

Include time, recruitment, language, analytical skills, software and ethics review where relevant.

What are the biggest feasibility or ethical risks?

Think about privacy, consent, vulnerable participants, sensitivity of data and limited access.

Feasibility decision

If you cannot realistically access the required evidence, revise the population, context or scope.
Do not design a question around data you have no lawful or ethical way to obtain.

05 / WRITE AND REFINE

Draft your research question

Choose an opening that fits what you want to know. “How” and “why” are often useful for explanatory or interpretive work; “what,” “to what extent,” and comparison questions can also be appropriate depending on the design.

First draft

Refine the wording

Underline ambiguous concepts. Circle the population or material. Check whether the question assumes its own answer or contains multiple separate questions. Rewrite below.

Possible subquestions (only if necessary)

Illustrative progression

Topic: AI and academic referencing

Too broad: “What is the impact of AI on students?”

More focused: “How do postgraduate students at [institution] evaluate and verify references suggested by generative AI tools when preparing literature reviews?”

06 / FINAL QUALITY CHECK

Stress-test your question

Check each criterion before treating the question as ready for feedback.

☐ Clear	A reader can understand what is being investigated.
☐ Focused	The scope is neither impossibly broad nor trivially narrow.
☐ Researchable	Relevant evidence can realistically be collected or examined.
☐ Significant	The answer could contribute meaningful understanding.
☐ Open	The wording does not predetermine the conclusion.
☐ Ethically feasible	The study can respect privacy, consent and applicable approval requirements.
☐ Aligned	The question can guide objectives, research design and analysis.

My current best research question

What feedback do I need from my supervisor or mentor?

A research question is provisional, not permanent. Literature review, pilot work and feasibility checks may lead you to refine it further.

Continue learning

Pair this worksheet with SRS Insights on research questions and research gaps. For individual guidance, visit smartresearchsolutions.in/academic-research-support/.