



HOW TO CHOOSE A RESEARCH TOPIC AND DEVELOP A RESEARCH QUESTION

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Introduction

Every great research project begins with a question. In psychology, your research question is the foundation of your entire study; it shapes your design, guides your analysis, and determines the impact of your findings. A well-developed question ensures that your research is focused, meaningful, and achievable.

Why is this so important?

- A clear question prevents your project from becoming too broad or vague.
- It helps you choose the right methods and participants.
- It ensures your work contributes to psychological knowledge and addresses real-world issues.

Think of your research question as the compass for your study. Without it, you risk getting lost in a sea of ideas. With it, you have a clear direction that makes your research purposeful and manageable.

This booklet will guide you through:

1. How to choose a topic that interests you
2. How to narrow it down into a focused question
3. How to avoid common mistakes

By the end, you'll be equipped to create research questions that are clear, testable, and relevant... the first step toward producing high-quality psychological research.

Step 1: Generating a Research Topic

The first step in developing a strong research question is choosing a topic that interests you. Your topic will guide your entire project, so it's important to start broad and then narrow down.

Start Broad!

Think about areas you've:

- Enjoyed in lectures
- Read about in textbooks or journals
- Seen on the news or social media
- Watched in documentaries or TV shows

Here are some popular areas in psychology with examples:

Social Psychology

Focuses on how people think, feel, and behave in social contexts.

- Prejudice: How do implicit biases influence hiring decisions? Does exposure to multicultural media reduce racial prejudice?
- Conformity: Do students conform more in online group discussions compared to face-to-face? How does peer pressure affect ethical decision-making?
- Social Media: Does Instagram use predict social comparison and self-esteem? How does TikTok engagement relate to perceived social belonging?

Cognitive Psychology

Examines mental processes like memory, attention, and decision-making.

- Memory: Does sleep quality affect short-term memory recall? How does stress impact eyewitness memory accuracy?
- Attention: Does multitasking reduce attention span during lectures? How does smartphone notification frequency affect sustained attention?
- Decision-Making: Do people make riskier decisions under time pressure? How does framing influence financial decision-making?

Developmental Psychology

Studies changes across the lifespan.

- Aging: Does physical activity improve cognitive functioning in older adults? How does loneliness impact mental health in retirees?

Clinical Psychology

Focuses on mental health and treatment.

- Does mindfulness reduce symptoms of anxiety in university students? How does social support buffer against depression? Does online therapy improve accessibility for rural populations?

Health Psychology

- Exercise and Well-being: Does regular exercise improve mood in university students? How does yoga impact stress levels?
- Diet and Cognition: Does breakfast consumption improve attention in lectures? How does sugar intake affect memory performance?

Step 2: Narrowing Down Your Topic

Use the FINER criteria to help narrow down your topic. Ask yourself:

F

FEASIBLE

Your research question should be realistic given your resources, time, and skills.

Ask yourself:

- Do I have access to participants?
- Can I collect the data within the deadline?
- Do I have the tools or software needed?

Example: Studying "global attitudes toward climate change" might be too big for a student project, but "attitudes toward climate change among UK university students" is feasible.

I

INTERESTING

Choose a topic that genuinely interests you and your audience.

Why? You'll stay motivated during the project. Readers and examiners will find it engaging.

Example: If you're passionate about social media, research its impact on mental health rather than a topic you find boring.

N

NOVEL

Your question should add something new; either by exploring a gap, applying a theory in a new context, or using a different method.

Ask: Has this been studied before? Can I look at a new population or variable?

Example: Instead of repeating "Does Instagram affect body image?" you could ask "Does Instagram use predict body dissatisfaction differently in adolescents vs. adults?"

E

ETHICAL

Your study must protect participants and follow ethical guidelines.

Consider: Informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality, minimising/mitigating risk

Example: Studying trauma without proper safeguards would be unethical. Instead, focus on non-invasive measures like attitudes or perceptions.

R

RELEVANT

•Your question should matter to psychology and society.

Ask: Does it contribute to theory or practice? Is it linked to real-world issues?

Example: Researching stress in students is relevant because it can inform mental health interventions

Step 3: Developing a Research Question

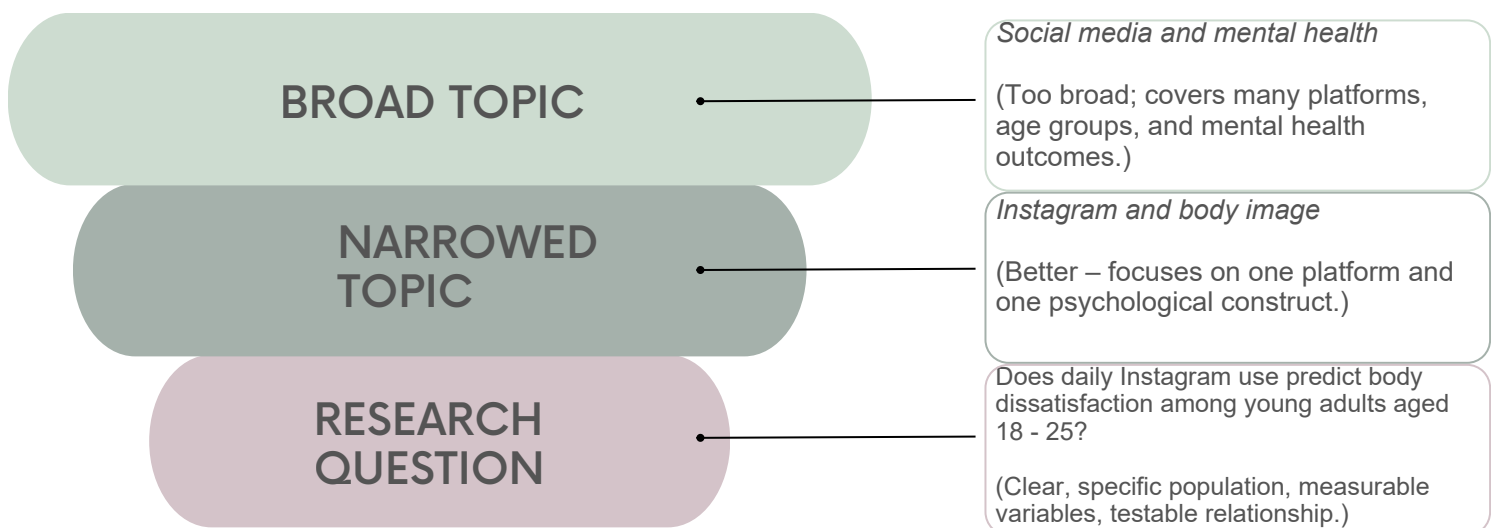
Once you have a narrowed topic, the next step is to turn it into a clear, focused, and testable research question. This is the most important part of your research process because your question determines:

- What data you collect
- Which methods you use
- How you analyse and interpret results

What makes a good research question?

A strong research question should be:

- Clear: Easy to understand and not ambiguous.
- Focused: Narrow enough to be manageable within your time and resources.
- Testable: Can be answered using data (quantitative or qualitative).
- Based on theory or evidence: Linked to existing research or psychological concepts.



Step 4: How to Word a Research Question

Once you have chosen a topic and narrowed it down, the final step is learning how to word your research question clearly and effectively. The way you phrase your question matters because it determines:

- What you will measure
- How you will analyse your data
- Whether your question is understandable and researchable

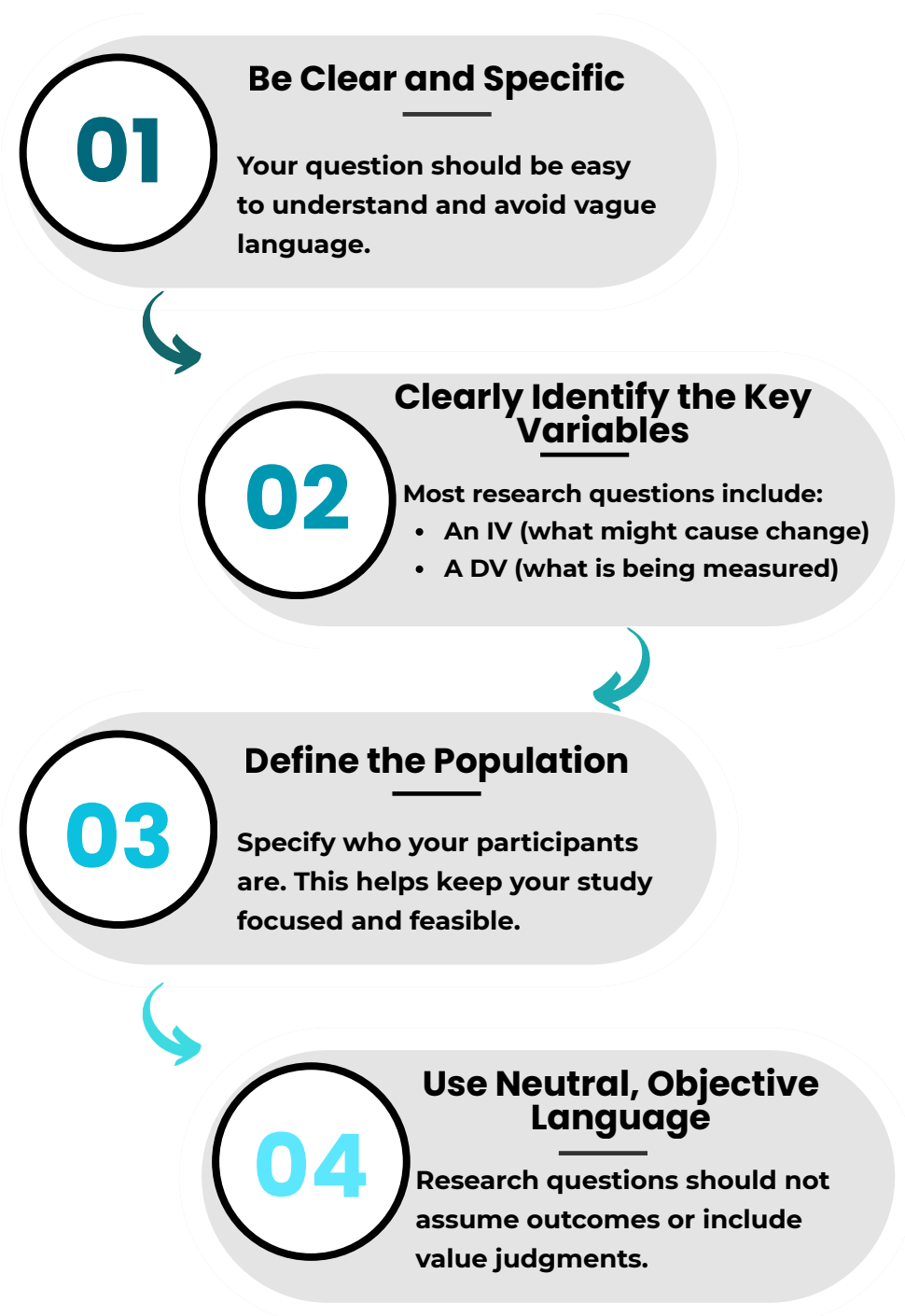
A well-worded research question is specific, neutral, and testable.

Key Principles for Wording Research Questions:

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Common Question Structures:

Relationship Questions (correlation)

Used when exploring associations:

Is X related to Y in Z population?

Example: Is smartphone use related to attention span in university students?

Prediction Questions (regression)

Used when one variable is expected to predict another:

Does X predict Y in Z population?

Example: Does perceived stress predict sleep quality in undergraduate students?

Difference Questions (t-test/ANOVA)

Used when comparing groups or conditions:

Is there a difference in Y between Group A and Group B?

Example: Is there a difference in stress levels between first-year and final-year students?

Step 5: Designing a Study to Answer Your Research Question

Once you have a clearly worded research question, the next step is to design a study that can answer it. Your study design explains how you will collect data in a way that is appropriate, ethical, and aligned with your question.

A good study design ensures that:

- Your research question can be meaningfully answered
- The data you collect matches your planned analysis
- Your study is feasible and ethical

Always start with your Research Question and design your study around it! The wording of your research question helps determine the best design.