

Research Questions

In the face of an assignment prompt, we might feel a lack of confidence. Are our ideas good enough to put in a paper? And do we have any ideas at all?

In this guide, we will consider the fact that much writing begins with a *lack* of knowledge. Instead of viewing writing as the expression of *good ideas*, we will cultivate an attitude toward writing that begins with formulating *good questions*.

Piquing Our Own Interests

Let's start with an example from a 1st-year Seattle School course, CSL 502: History & Systems. The below is excerpted from the course's first assignment sequence:

This assignment sequence provides opportunities to examine one major counseling theory, its influence on Western psychological frameworks, its contributions and limitations, how it frames the relationship between counselor and client, and how it might foster accompaniment either now or in the future. Choose one of the major counseling theories listed below to engage throughout the semester:

Classical Psychoanalysis || Analytical/Jungian Psychology || Adlerian/Individual Psychology || Client-/Person-Centered Therapy || Gestalt Therapy || Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy || Behavior Therapy || Cognitive (Behavior) Therapy

Here, we are confronted with an intimidating list of psychological frameworks. On what basis do we select the theory that we will stick with for the entire term? Especially if we don't have any background knowledge about most or any of them?

First, we must let go of the expectation that there is a "right" answer. If we select a theory that we don't end up using in our careers, it is still valuable to learn that that theory is not useful to us. Professionals in any discipline have knowledge of a wide array of subjects in their field, even if they don't directly use all of it in their daily work. As students, this kind of trial-and-error is how we broaden our knowledge. To this end, here are two approaches we can take to this prompt:

1. Do any of the theories stick out based on what I have already discussed in class? If so, what specifically interests me about these theories?
2. What kind of professional work do I want to do? Which of these theories do practitioners in that area utilize in their work?

Curiosity is key. Rather than trying to force ourselves to make the supposed “right” decision, following our interests keeps us engaged in our studies. Furthermore, articulating *why* we feel curious about or drawn to (as well as uncurious about or repelled by) certain topics helps us focus our interests for future assignments.

Formulating Research Questions

The questions above are a first step in formulating research questions. Research questions help us narrow down what kinds of sources we are looking for. Research questions are not necessarily attached to specific prompts; they can be persistent personal and professional questions that guide our work across projects.

Types of Research Questions

Below are three example research questions that will help us consider the different purposes and scopes that such questions can assume:

1. How is gestalt therapy applied in helping patients heal their religious trauma?
2. How has decolonial theory extended or critiqued Jungian psychology’s concept of the collective unconscious?
3. How can the study of psychology support US society in confronting shifting power dynamics today?

Let’s take these questions in turn: Question 1 concerns practical applications of psychological theory. It will direct our attention toward concrete clinical research.

Question 2 concerns theorization. It might draw from clinical research, but it will ultimately remain at the level of theory as opposed to practice.

Question 3 is a high-level question that cannot be answered in a single class paper. We will need to identify sub-questions that can be tackled one-by-one, such as:

- 3a. What theories attend to collective psyches, and how are these applied?
- 3b. What psychological research exists regarding the impact of world-historical events on individuals’ mental health?

It is common to have a high-level question that, when we try to write a paper on it, involves more research than we can fit into 10 or even 20 pages. Sub-questions focus our research while keeping our eyes on our larger lines of inquiry.

Which Type Comes First?

There's no wrong place to start with research questions. We can have a big question that breaks down into sub-questions, or we can have several smaller questions that are either unrelated or point toward a larger question we didn't know we had.

We can also begin with no question at all and let our interests be piqued by class materials or light research on a topic, which then suggests to us a more concrete question. Wherever we start, we should eventually articulate an appropriately sized research question for a project in order to focus our research and writing process.

Identifying Keywords

A final note on research questions regards keywords. These are words or phrases that help us identify when different sources are talking about the same subject.

The names of different psychological frameworks, such as “Classical Psychoanalysis” or “Behavior Therapy” help us locate sources that are dealing with specific ideas and techniques we might wish to study. Terms like “adolescence” or “trauma” help us specify clinical applications that we wish to look into.

As you are reading through course materials or research for a project, take notice of unfamiliar or hyper-specific words that are repeated across sources. Some academic articles even list keywords at the beginning or end of the text to signal the topics they are discussing. Using keywords in research questions helps specify what you are asking and what kinds of sources are relevant to your question.

Even if they don't wind up in your research question itself, keep a list of keywords relevant to your interests and use these when searching databases.