

Create a Research Question

A common mistake is to collect all the facts you can find on a particular topic and then dump them into an essay (Booth et al., 2008, p. 40). This is not acceptable at tertiary level. You need to start with a research question.

What Is a Research Question?

It is a “specific question” that requires a “specific answer” (Booth et al., 2008, p. 41). The question will probably change slightly (broaden or narrow in focus) as you do more research and gain a better understanding of your topic. Getting the wording right can take a while, but it is worth it.

Why Do I Need One?

1. It gives you key words to type into a database.
2. It guides you in knowing what to read and what to leave alone.
3. It appears in your introduction as a statement (i.e. as the answer to your research question).
4. It gives structure to your whole essay and helps you develop your own voice as you answer the question.

An Example

Should emblematic gestures be taught as part of a language grammar course?

This is the research question that matches Ali’s mind map (on the previous page). Can you see how this question gave her a clear focus? She was only looking at “emblematic” gestures even though there are other kinds. Her interest was in teaching gestures as a “grammar” component not, for example, as a cultural element of the language programme.

References

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2008). *The craft of research* (3rd ed.)
The University of Chicago Press.