

How to Write a Research Question



Elements of a Research Question:

A research question contains two parts:

1. The topic for your paper, usually in the form of a noun or noun phrase.
2. The focus, which suggests what you will say about the topic and tells you what kind of information to look for as you read.

Example: “Why did Kendrick Lamar become such a brilliant artist?”

The general *topic* of this question is the noun “Kendrick Lamar.” The *focus* is why he became the artist he is today—causes of his brilliance.

Kinds of Research Questions in the Humanities:

- **Cause:** “Why did Kendrick Lamar become such a brilliant artist?”
- **Effect:** “What effect has Kendrick Lamar had on the culture?”
- **Comparison:** “How can Kendrick Lamar’s career be compared to the careers of his peers?”
- **Definition:** “What are the signs that Kendrick Lamar is an artist superior to all others?”
- **Classification:** “What are the patterns in Kendrick Lamar’s work?”
- **Problem and Solution:** “How could Kendrick Lamar address criticisms to his work without compromising his principles?”
- **Process:** “How did Kendrick Lamar evolve as an artist?”
- **Argument in a yes/no format:** “Should Kendrick Lamar address contemporary politics in his work?”

A research question for a **literature paper** is likely to look like this:

How does [insert author's name] use [insert literary device like setting, theme, allegory, etc.] to achieve [insert an effect the author achieves or an important point they make]?

Examples:

1. How does Michelle Zauner use food as an allegory in “Crying in H Mart,” and how successful is this allegory in communicating the narrator’s relationship with her mother?
2. In the essay titled “Shame,” how does Dick Gregory use the details of Helene Tucker’s manners to generate empathy for the narrator’s position?
3. In the essay titled “Salvation,” how does Langston Hughes use irony to underscore his commentary on human nature?

Q: Why learn how to come up with your own research question given that many (if not most) undergraduate professors will supply research questions themselves?

A: The further you get in academia, the more likely it is that you will have to generate your own research question *and* the more likely it is that you will not be explicitly taught how to do so. Since developing your own research question is actually fairly tricky, I’m teaching you how to do it now. Also, while many undergraduate professors do assign writing prompts, you may not be interested in writing on the topics they assign. If you know how to pose your own question, you may present your professor with a paper proposal that’s relevant to the course topic but more interesting to you personally. If you write on a topic that interests you, you’re more likely not only to better enjoy the process but to do a better job.

Most professors are overworked. They don’t have time to shepherd each individual student through the process of developing their own research question. However, if you can present a professor with a completed paper proposal that contains a workable research question and a workable thesis, the professor will be more likely to allow you the freedom to write on your topic of choice. Also, as long as your proposal concerns the material they’ve taught and as long as you frame your proposal in terms of your interest on another topic (and not in terms of your *disinterest* in the topic they proposed), the professor will likely remember you as a uniquely motivated student.