

How to... develop a research question to inform your practice

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Are there issues or challenges you face as an organisation? Are you or do you aspire to be a learning organisation? Could research help you develop a better understanding of the cultural value of your work?

If you answer yes to any of these, this 'How to ...' guide will help you develop the research questions to help you choose the best research approach for you.

What is a research question?

Patricia Leavy defines a research question simply as “the questions you seek to answer or explore. Once you have developed your research purpose statement, which details your objectives, you can develop questions that will help you achieve those objectives. The questions must be researchable, in other words these are question that can be directly answered through research.”

So research begins when we want to know something. For example, you might want to know more about your audience, their perceptions, needs, motivations and behaviours, or you might want to know what different stakeholders value most in your work. Understandings from research might allow us to hone our strategies and make decisions based on better insight.

At the heart of any research is a good research question that sets out the purpose for the research in a way that is clear, simple, interesting, relevant and answerable. Too broad and you may lose focus. Too narrow and you might hamstring creative thinking and the potential for 'serendipity'. At the same time, you need to ensure your question is rigorous, open and doesn't presuppose a given answer.

A useful rule of thumb in framing your question is to consider where it sits in relation to these two different approaches:

- 1. Explanatory questions:** these centre on seeking specific information and clear answers. Let's call this the 'Who, Where, When' questions. For example: Who are our regular audiences? Where can we find them? When is the best time to communicate with them?
- 2. Exploratory questions:** as the name suggests, these are about trying to explore a situation, problem or occurrences that you want to understand more deeply. Let's call this the 'Why, What, How' questions. For example: Why are we failing to engage these specific audiences? What might the barriers to engagement be? How might these be overcome?

Creating a good question influences the rest of the steps you take conducting the research, your choice of research methods and ultimately the quality of the insights the research delivers.



How does this guide work?

As a process-designer, I have drawn on my own experiences in guiding people through exercises and processes to establish purpose, clarify intention and think things through. For this 'How to ...' guide, I've developed a five stage process called 'Clarifying your research question' (Fig. 1).

Each stage has some priming thoughts, questions and activities to guide you through the process and help you develop a question that structures your research. The best way to read this, therefore, is with a pencil in hand and a blank piece of paper in front of you. Here are some tips:

- Come to the process with a creative and open mindset.
- Don't try to write for an imagined reader in a language you feel they want to hear.
- Instead, be true to your own thoughts and authentic voice.
- At each stage, record your responses to the questions posed.
- Write or draw them as fulsomely as you can to make sure you get everything down.
- Then, at the end of each exercise, distil what emerges into the key elements that you feel are the most important, interesting and relevant.
- This can be done individually or as a team exercise, the latter providing opportunities to channel the diverse perspectives of your colleagues and build a sense of investment and ownership.

Let's begin.

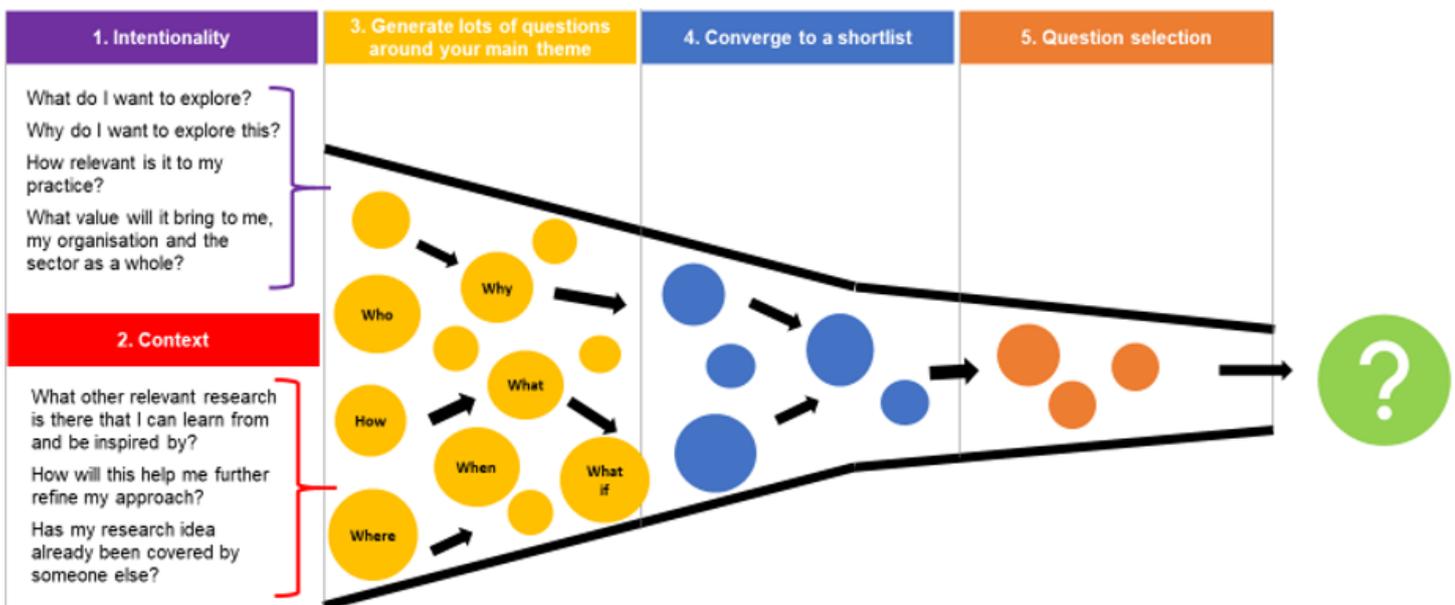


Figure 1: Clarifying your research question

Step 1: Intentionality

All good research has a clear intention underpinning it. This keeps you focused even though you don't really know what answers you are going to find... that is what's so exciting about research.

At this very first stage in the process, you may want to ask yourself the following:

- What do you want to know, explore or understand?
- Where has the impetus to do research come from?
- What value might this investigation bring to your practice?
- How might it advance your ability to connect and engage with others?
- How might it leverage interest in and support for what you do?
- And what value might this bring more broadly to the sector as a whole?

An example of this was a piece of research I conducted for a national dance company who wanted to understand how its brand and repertoire were perceived by loyal and potential dance audiences (**What do you want to know?**). More specifically, they wanted to know the degree to which the company's brand and reputation stimulate attendance over and above the title of an individual piece of work.

The impetus came from a concern around low take-up of its mixed bill offer, even from its core audience (**Where has the impetus come from?**).

The company believed research would enable them to explore the relative merits of brand development and/or reviewing programming to stimulate attendance (**What value might this bring?**).

The results supported their audience and brand development strategy (**How might it advance your ability to connect and engage with others?**) and potentially programme development (**How might it leverage interest in and support for what you do?**)

The results informed how the company approach brand development, repertoire and audience development.

Step 2: Context

Great research can contribute to a growing body of research, disrupt dominant thinking, bring new and fresh perspectives to bear, open a whole new avenue of enquiry or fill a gap in knowledge and understanding.

With this in mind, it's always a good idea to do some initial reading around your subject of enquiry to bring depth and dimension to your thinking, and to avoid duplication of other research. Sources include:

- Relevant journals and trade publications
- Knowledge hubs such as [Culture Hive](#)
- Published research from Arts Councils, charitable trusts, sector support organisations and consultancies
- Conference papers

- Blogs, podcasts, [Medium](#) articles
- Books
- Online forums

Exploring context in this way might help you refocus, refine and expand your field of vision. It might bring useful reference points and surface how your research could contribute to existing debate. It might elicit a lightbulb moment where everything falls into place. And it might inspire you to reach out to those whose thinking, practice or research resonates, to exchange ideas and clarify your intention.

Step 3: Generating questions

Now you have your subject of enquiry and have contextualised it in some way you are ready to begin formulating your research question(s). At this stage in the process you will be in beta mode. This means developing a question without aiming for perfection, in the knowledge that what emerges will be subject to further refinement once you begin developing your research methods and identify who will carry out the research (i.e. in-house or with a research partner).

Rather than trying to 'lock the question down' from the start, this three-stage process helps you open it up by generating a longlist of questions that you then evaluate, before selecting the one that excites you the most. Here is what you need to do:

- Make sure you have clearly in mind what it is you want to know, explore or understand.
- Now, write down as many variations of questions as you can, from as many different angles as possible, that might address this topic.
- Write freely and don't overthink whilst you do this.
- See this as a creative, intuitive exercise.
- Once you have exhausted all avenues look beyond your perceived limitations and personal vulnerabilities by asking questions, such as:
 - What questions would I ask if I knew I could not fail?
 - What questions would I ask if I knew I were not being judged?
 - What questions would I ask if money were no object?

Now you have your longlist.

Step 4: Converge to a shortlist

Now you have a long list of questions which you need to start rationalising down to a more workable shortlist. Here is what you need to do:

- Scan through your longlist and remove those that are clearly not right.
- This might be because it doesn't match the original intention set out in Step 1 or because there is already enough research on the topic identified in Step 2 or it might just not be achievable to find out the answer with the resources available to you.
- From the remaining questions, group similar questions into clusters (or themes) and discard any duplications.

Now you have your shortlist.

Step 5: Question selection

It's now time to stress-test the shortlist to make sure you select the right one. Here you need to filter the remaining questions through the criteria below to strike a good balance between rational and intuitive considerations, and ensure the inherent rigour of the question.

Rational considerations

- The research question is clear and simple
- It addresses the original intention
- You can see how answering it might advance your interests and your practice
- It brings something new, relevant and interesting to the table
- It is feasible given your available resources

Intuitive considerations

- I have a positive gut feeling about it
- It is exciting and meaningful to me
- It gets to the heart of the matter
- It makes me feel enthusiastic
- It will hold my energy and interest over time
- It begs to be answered

Considerations around rigour

- It doesn't presuppose a particular answer
- The questions are answerable
- I am willing to receive unexpected and unwanted findings
- It will be meaningful and relevant to other practitioners and organisations or policy makers
- It doesn't just duplicate existing research

Once you have landed on 'the question', you can begin to refine the methods with which you will embark on your research project. If this is in collaboration with other organisations you might want to look at our ['how to' guide on collaborative research](#). If it is with a research partner you might want to look at our ['how to' guide on working with an academic research partner](#).

Once you have conducted your research we would love you to share your findings, reflections and learning with us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk

About the contributor

Lisa Baxter FRSA is the Partnerships Coordinator for the Centre for Cultural Value's Collaborate Fund and the founder of The Experience Business. Over the past 10 years, she has pioneered the application of human-centred design and creative facilitation to ignite vision, strengthen purpose, build brands, develop new products and services, delight audiences and inspire a public-service mentality. This has seen her deliver transformative programmes, workshops, masterclasses internationally, as well as lectures and workshops on how to apply human-centred design and creative thinking in an arts context for **The Arts, Philanthropy and Fundraising Summer School** (UK), the **University of Leeds, University of Groningen** (Holland), **Deakin University's Arts Participation Incubator Unit, Melbourne** (Australia) and the **University of Warwick** (UK).



Lisa is also a qualitative researcher specialising in exploring the audience experience of the arts and their impacts. She was the lead researcher in this Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England funded programme, Qualitative Methods of Enquiry into the Arts Consumption Experience and its Impact, in partnership with the University of Sheffield and Audiences Yorkshire, with findings published in [The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts](#) (2013, Sydney, Intellect).

Glossary

Process design: the development of processes that support organisational vision and goals.

**Have you undertaken a similar project?
What did you learn?**

**Share your reflections and learning with us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk
and we'll feed this into future versions of this 'How to...' guide.**

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