



Choosing your **PhD** research question

Dr. Jay Jericho

BCom *Adel*, Grad Cert Ed BEd Prof Hons *Tas*, MEd (Hons) DSocSc *Syd*

jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca

Objective:

This presentation explores 10 factors that may help you to choose the most suitable research question as early as possible.

What is a dissertation 'research question'?

For some scholars, the notion of the 'research question' may overlap with a concept termed the research objective.

Other synonyms for this term may include:

- Research aims
- Research goals
- Research purpose

The use of these terminologies varies in the literature. Take care to confirm what the author is referring to if they use these terms.

Your research question is a statement that you make in the thesis introduction that informs your audience of the intention of your study. If someone asks you what is your 'research question' you should be able to summarise this in three sentences or less.

The research question should normally be stated in the first or second sub-section of your **introduction chapter**.

This prominent placement is logical.

Your audience should not be required to read numerous pages of your thesis to discover what your thesis aims to achieve and how it aims to achieve this outcome. If you do not make this clear early, those with an interest in your thesis may prematurely abandon reading it.

A 'golden rule' of thesis writing is that you must avoid repetition. Depending on the unique requirements of your thesis, you may need to repeat your research question in multiple parts of your thesis.

If you need to repeat your research question in other parts of your thesis, make it clear to your reader why it is **necessary** to restate a point that you have already made. Be sure that you rearticulate your thesis question in a **fresh** way so that you don't irritate your audience with repetition.

It is common to see the research question explicitly stated in the thesis **Abstract**. This placement is logical. The **Abstract** is the first section of a thesis that your audience reads to determine whether its content is relevant to their needs.

You may sometimes see reference to the research question in the **literature review chapter**. A doctoral scholar may explicitly state how the ways in which they advance the literature intertwines with the grand intention of their research project.

The research question may be restated in the **research methods chapter**. This inclusion is logical. A doctoral scholar must inform their audience how their methodological design is structured so that data collection and data analysis methods allow the scholar to achieve the stated objectives of their thesis.

Note: the Abstract, Introduction, Literature review and Methods sections of your thesis comprise your introductory chapters.

10 factors that may aid you to choose your research question

1. Your scholarly passions



2. Your strengths

3. Your supervisors' strengths

4. Your faculty or university strengths

5. Complexity of the research question

6. Prior research

7. Access to data

8. Professional experience

9. Relative 'ease' of the project

10. Access to funding and networks

These factors are not mutually exclusive. The degree to which you allow any of these factors to shape your research question is your decision. I argue that your scholarly passions should be afforded strong weight when you are weighing up these factors.

You are more likely to have the **stamina** to complete a PhD thesis if you choose a research question that relates to an area of study that you are **passionate** about.



Missy Mozart

Missy has an **affinity** for
Isan folk music.



Justin Tyme

Justin has a **strong**
interest in astrophysics.



Richard Richardson

Rich is **keen** on the political
economy of Monaco.



Cathy Black

Cat is **passionate** about
veterinary laser surgery.

If you are not **passionate** about your discipline, then you are more likely to abandon your research project in response to the many hurdles and challenges that constantly arise over the years.

Your passions (continued)

In the Arts, humanities and social sciences there is a so-called rule of 4:1. About 80% of what you write in your drafts are not included in your final manuscript. It is not uncommon to write a polished chapter over many months and later delete this chapter because of the word limit or because you have fine-tuned your research question. If you are not **passionate** about your research question, you may be overwhelmed by these 'routine' setbacks and you are less likely to complete.



Your strengths

Reflect on your strengths. You are advised to choose an area of study that you are **knowledgeable** about. You may have a strong track-record of success in a particular sub-field.

Do you favour quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches? Do you work best alone (Arts thesis) or with teams (e.g. collaborative scientific laboratory team study).

Your supervisors' strengths

Many candidates get the opportunity to reflect on their supervisors' strengths prior to enrolling, as the Faculty allows applicants to contact academics direct to arrange supervision.

Imagine this scenario. You wish to research human rights issues in the Asian subcontinent region. You enroll at the University of Toronto. Your supervisors are experts in the Sri Lankan Civil War. As a result you decide to fine-tune your research question to focus on this War so that you can tap into your **supervisors' research expertise**.

Your university or faculty strengths

You may define your research question based on the **strengths of your university or Faculty**.

Imagine this scenario. Concordia University is the only institute that accepts your research proposal and application. Your Faculty are open to supporting any research question in the area of energy technology. You do some groundwork and discover that this university has the best laboratories and funding support for renewable energy research. You therefore decide to research issues related to solar energy technology.

Complexity of the research question

Some research questions are more difficult than others. This is a subjective argument. You may consider a question difficult, whereas a colleague in your field may consider the question easy, and *vice versa*. Some PhD candidates are happy to choose a research question that meets the minimum criteria required to make a substantially original contribution to knowledge. Others purposefully choose a question of maximum difficulty. Either extreme, or somewhere in the middle is acceptable, so long as you choose a research question that is within your capability.

Complexity of the research question (continued)

Projects that aim to **build or debunk a theory of knowledge that has universal applications across disciplines** are not easy to achieve within the time limit imposed on doctoral research. Consider these social scientists who developed theory that has been used by many disciplines: Connell (gender), Foucault (sexuality) and Rawls (justice as fairness). These bodies of works were created over more than a decade. You have more chance of finishing if you narrow your research question using parameters such as time, space, institutions and social groups (e.g. race).

Prior research

Some PhD candidates draw on **scholarly research they have conducted in the past**. This may include work done in a Bachelor Degree thesis, Master thesis or research done for scholarly publications. An advantage of this approach is that you are building on your existing knowledge and resources such as material printed for your prior literature review. This may save you time.

Prior research

(continued)

Be wary of building on prior research. You must not submit the same piece of work for assessment. You also need to make clear how your new work makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge beyond what you have achieved in the past. If you do not choose a fresh research area, you may feel 'stale' two years into a PhD. This may undermine your motivation and progress.

Access to data

You must choose a research question where data is accessible or can be created (e.g. using an online survey). Consider the issue of 'ease of access'. In some cases, data may be accessible, but it might be very time-consuming to extract. This is not a reason *per se* to automatically avoid a research question that you are passionate about. Bear in mind that around half of all students who do not complete their PhD state that they believed they could have finished if they were awarded more time. **It might be best to avoid projects that require cumbersome actions to gather data if you foresee that your timeline for completion will be tight.**

Professional experience and career path

Many doctoral candidates choose to draw on knowledge they have gained from their past and current **professional employment**. If you have been working in the field of computer security and IT engineering for the past decade, it may make sense to pursue a PhD in this sub-field as the conceptual literature that you draw on should be familiar to you.

Professional experience and career path (continued)

Carefully consider your preferred career path, and keep a second and third backup option. The number of PhD graduates continues to grow each year. Around one in seven PhD graduates will secure a tenured full-time academic teaching position within three years of graduation. Consider options available in the **corporate, public and NGO sectors**.

Access to funding

Consider choosing a research question that is most likely to attract funding from industry, government and academic sponsors. At present the following topics are popular among scholarship sponsors:

- **Population studies and migration**
- **‘Green’ (environmental) policy**
- **Bio-engineering and healthcare**
- **Renewable energy**
- **Nanotechnology**
- **I.T. security**

Access to networks

A PhD thesis is less difficult to complete if you have access to a network of support that is freely available within your sub-field. Consider choosing a research question in an area where you can gain support from:

- Industry sponsors
- Individual professional practitioners
- Other research candidates
- Academics who you can collaborate with to co-author publications.

Further reading

Dunleavy, P. (2003), *Authoring a PhD: How to plan, draft, write and finish a doctoral thesis or dissertation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

See: “Defining the central research questions” in Chapter 2 (pp. 18–25).

<http://www.academia.edu/download/35311756/Authoring_a_PhD_Thesis_How_to_Plan_Draft_Write_and_Finish_a_Doctoral_Dissertation_2003_1.pdf> Accessed 10 August 2016.

This is a 312-page open-access (free) quality textbook. I suggest you access this today.

Jones, R. (2003), Choosing a research question, *Asia Pacific Family Medicine*, 2(1), 42–44.

<http://www.apfmj-archive.com/afm2.1/afm_050.pdf>. Accessed 10 August 2016.

An Acrobat pdf copy of this slideshow is available at

<http://www.collegeprofessor.ca/phd-writing-project.html>

jjericho@collegeprofessor.ca



CollegeProfessor

