

# The Qualities of a Good Research Question

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the characteristics that make for good research questions. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

## 1. Objective Answers

First, a good research question is a question that can be answered in an objective way, at least partially and at least for now. Later, when you develop an argumentative thesis, you will be able to take a position on the topic.

Be wary of questions that include “should” or “ought” because those words often (although not always) indicate a values-based question.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The question “Should assisted suicide be legal?” cannot be answered objectively because the answer varies depending on one’s values.

However, most values-based questions can be turned into research questions by judicious reframing.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The question “Should assisted suicide be legal?” can be rephrased as “What are the ethical implications of legalizing assisted suicide?”

Using a “what are” frame turns a values-based question into a legitimate research question by moving it out of the world of debate and into the world of investigation.

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## 2. Available Information

Second, a good research question is one that can be answered using information that already exists or that can be collected.

➞ **EXAMPLE** “Does carbon-based life exist outside of Earth’s solar system?” seems like a perfectly good research question in the sense that it is not values-based, and can thus be answered in an objective way. However, you would have a difficult time finding concrete information on this topic.

Collecting data about the presence of life outside of Earth’s solar system is not yet possible with current technology. This is not a good research question because it is not possible to obtain the data that would be

needed to answer it.

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## 3. Open Inquiries

Finally, a good research question is a question that hasn't already been answered, hasn't been answered completely, or hasn't been answered for your specific context.

If the answer to the question is readily available in an encyclopedia, textbook, or reference book, then it is a homework question, not a research question. It was probably a research question in the past, but if the answer is so thoroughly known that you can easily look it up and find it, then it is no longer an open question.

However, it is important to remember that as new information becomes available, homework questions can sometimes be reopened as research questions. Equally important, a question may have been answered for one population or circumstance, but not for all populations or all circumstances.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the qualities inherent to good research questions. Specifically, you looked at how good research questions are questions that have **objective answers**, **available information**, and **open inquiries** that can be further investigated.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "The Qualities of a Good Research Question" tutorial.