

Developing a research question

All students, regardless of the subject chosen, must frame their research question as a question. A hypothesis or statement of intent is not acceptable. The reason for this is that a question helps students to retain focus throughout the essay.

A research question is a **clear and focused** question centred on a research topic. Research questions usually emerge when questions are asked about a particular issue that a student is interested in or curious about.

A research question helps to focus the research, providing a path through which students will undertake the research and writing process. A clear and well-focused research question, which has a specific aim, will allow a student to work towards developing a reasoned argument within the scope of the task, rather than the kind of “all about” essay that an unfocused research question can lead to.

Sometimes students may need to revise their research question; therefore, a research question should always be considered provisional until they have enough research data to make a reasoned argument.

Supervisors should note that unfortunately the IB is unable to comment on the suitability of individual research questions. This is because the development of an appropriate research question forms part of the assessment. Should supervisors require support or advice with regard to possible research questions, the [Online curriculum centre extended essay forum](#) is a good starting point.

Five steps to developing a research question



Choose a subject and topic that is of interest.

Deciding on a subject and topic that is of interest and in which the student is personally invested is important if their motivation is to be sustained throughout the process. The student should be able to identify, in a broad sense, what it is that they are interested in and why.



Carry out preliminary reading.

After deciding on a topic of interest students should undertake some general reading around the issue.

Questions they must consider at this stage are:

- What has already been written about this topic?
- Was it easy to find sources of information?
- Is there a range of different sources available?
- Is there a range of views or perspectives on the topic?
- What interesting questions have started to emerge from this reading?



Consider the emerging questions.

The student should now begin posing open-ended questions about their general topic. These questions will usually be framed using the terms “how”, “why” or “to what extent”.



Evaluate the question.

Once possible research questions have been posed they should be evaluated. This evaluation should be based on whether the research question is clear, focused, and arguable.

Clear: Will the reader understand the nature of my research? Will it direct the research being undertaken?

Focused: Will the research question be specific enough to allow for exploration within the scope of the task (that is, the number of words and time available)?

Arguable: Does the research question allow for analysis, evaluation and the development of a reasoned argument?



Consider research outcomes.

Once a provisional research question has been decided upon students should start thinking about the direction their research might take. This could be in terms of:

- suggesting possible outcomes of the research
- outlining the kind of argument they might make and how the research might support this
- considering options if the research available is not sufficient to support a sustained argument.

Sample research questions

The following table gives guidance on the difference between unclear and unfocused research questions and those that are appropriately clear and focused, lending themselves to in-depth research.

Unclear, unfocused and unarguable research questions	Clear, focused, narrow research questions lending themselves to in-depth research
What was the impact of Ho Chi Minh's allegiance to Lenin?	To what extent was nationalism the guiding factor in Ho Chi Minh's adoption of Leninism in 1920?
What is the history of Chinese theatre?	How does the legacy of Mei Lan Fang contribute to modern Jingju?
How important is chlorophyll to plant life?	What is the effect of different concentrations of kinetin on leaves aging and the biosynthesis of chlorophyll?
How can the US government's spending policy be reformed?	To what extent did the rising COE prices affect the demand for new and used cars by the consumer population and hence affect the revenue generated by the Singaporean economy for the period 2012–16?

An important note:

A question that is unclear or too broad will result in a narrative overview of the issue or event being discussed and provide little scope for analysis and reasoned argument. The result of this is that examiners will not be able to apply the range of marks available in the assessment criteria, particularly in relation to criterion C (critical thinking).