

Developing Research Questions:

Developing good questions—what you want to understand about your project--- is at the heart of our efforts during the preparation. One way to find out what you know and don't know about your project is to bombard it with questions. You may want to ask the predictable ones first. For example if your project is related to sanitation issues in Langrug your opening salvo might include standard journalist questions:

What are the current conditions in Langrug to address sanitation needs?

Why has it been difficult to build toilets acceptable to the community?

Who has been involved in efforts to address sanitation problems and how do different social actors frame the problem differently?

How have community groups participated in public consultations to improve service provision?

Where can we find successful examples of community led sanitation upgrades in informal settlements?

These initial set of questions invariably will lead to others. You might consider how sanitation provision is organized in Langrug and in the region (*structure*), how it operates over time (*process*), the factors that have brought the current sanitation system into existence (*causes*) as well as the effect the sanitation system has had (*consequences*). You might then consider the wider significance of your project and devise “big questions” such as how sanitation provision in informal settlements is part of a larger system of governance, in which the distribution of public resources in South Africa is contested on many fronts.

The answers to your research questions are not **found** ready-made or lying inert in a single article or report; they are something you **make** through your own critical thinking brought to bear on your sources. The most important goal, early on, is to come up with questions that challenge you and pique your interest. If you are having trouble formulating a question, read sources critically to find a problem. What do you find puzzling? Where do you detect inconsistencies, contradictions, incomplete explanations? These weaknesses can help you generate a new round of research questions.

Elements of the research questions page:

Element	Comment
Identify the area of concern.	Introduce readers to the topic and explain how you have come to be engaged with it
Describe why it's significant and to whom.	Here you tackle the “so what” or “who cares” attitude of your reader
Summarize points of agreement in your sources.	Here you consider what is not in dispute. Be concise
Examine main areas of disagreement and uncertainty.	One strategy is to note a few areas of disagreement but concentrate on the target issue.
Account for disagreements.	Explain why researchers have come to different conclusions. Do disagreements stem from different way of conceptualizing the problem, collecting data, data analysis, etc
Set out your research questions	Explain how they have emerged from the works you have been reviewing

Some Guidelines for Acknowledging and Discussing Source Materials¹

Often the most difficult challenge in writing the research question page is to develop a “research voice” that presents evidence and arguments in a factual, unbiased way. You should have no claims that might cause a reader to wonder “Says who?” This requires an understanding not only of how to cite reference materials, but also of when and how to discuss them.

The only parts of a research report that do not require acknowledgement are *common knowledge and facts available in a variety of sources*. That implies that everything else requires acknowledgement! However, certain types of material require more than a reference; they require explicit discussion of the source in the text, to establish the nature of the authority behind the quote or assertion.

Direct quotations should be used very sparingly; rarely should an entire sentence be quoted. In general, you should be summarizing and interpreting source materials. However, sometimes the actual wording itself, or the person who said it, will be of interest to the reader. In that case, it is typically appropriate to *explicitly acknowledge the source in the text* as well as providing a citation:

By the 1970s, according to the historian Marion Wallace states, South African churches began to “practice a radical new liberation theology.” (Wallace, 2011,p. 87).

Facts not widely known or easily available are cited in the normal way. Because they are facts, there is typically *no need for you to identify the source explicitly* in the text:

Climate change and increased demand is likely to have severe impacts on water availability in the Western Cape by 2025 (IPPC, 2007).

Judgments, opinions, claims, and arguable assertions are by far the most challenging type of content to properly acknowledge, since they fall on a continuum. The findings of previous researchers often fall into this category. *The more controversial, extreme, or subjective the content, the more necessary it is to explicitly indicate or discuss the source.* Some examples follow.

Although the following statement is not a fact, it is a *mild assertion* that few would argue with, and you could probably get away with stating it as long as it was followed by some evidence:

South African mining has long been a dynamic sector of the economy.

However, note that you can actually *turn the statement into a fact* by attributing it:

A leading economist has identified gold mining as a major pillar of the South African economy (Forsythe, 1998).

As the assertion, judgment, or opinion gets more controversial or subjective, *the writer must get more careful*. The following is one researcher’s conclusion, and probably not agreed on by all:

Richards concluded that the mining industry has benefited only a small proportion of the South African population (Richards, 2006).

Extreme positions require *great care, and perhaps some balance*. The following is one writer’s claim, presented in a way that makes clear its extreme nature:

Rhodes has gone so far as to claim that foreign control of the diamond industry and collusion with the ruling party in the form of kickbacks has led to widespread corruption among the political elite (Rhodes, 2010).

¹ Adapted from the Profs Vaz, Demetry, and Robertson. Note that all of the material and sources used as examples in this section have been fabricated.