

How to Focus Your Arguments: Research Questions

Good academic writing is writing that answers a specific set of questions. The simple answer to this set of research questions is the **thesis** of the text, usually (but not always) stated in a sentence or two near the beginning of the paper. The longer answer is the rest of the paper, in which your goal is to provide evidence and analysis for why your answer to these questions is reasonable and likely to be true. An important part of the pre-writing process, then—before writing a thesis, before writing an outline, before collecting sources—is formulating strong research questions that you are attempting to answer. Here are some general tips for putting these questions together:

Make sure your questions open-ended:

An open-ended question is a question that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. This is because yes-or-no questions are not all that compelling most of the time. More importantly, however, yes-or-no questions are more often than not badly phrased questions that simplify a more complex problem. “Does Christianity promote social justice in society?” for instance, flattens a dynamic problem that brings in questions of context and history into a broad generalization, whether one answers the question in the positive or the negative. An open-ended version of that same question would be something like “How have liberation theologies promoted social justice since the 1970s? What areas of society have been neglected by this approach?” This version of the question is open-ended, in that you cannot answer it with a flat yes/no. While you will still take a position in your writing—your goal is still to make an argument—that argument is now more nuanced and thoughtful. To answer the question, you have to explore the history of liberation theologies and their practical effects on society, including (in the second question) potential criticisms of liberation theologies. In short, the questions being asked are already starting to form the argument of the paper, which will help focus your attention when collecting evidence.

Make sure your questions are answerable:

In life there are questions that for one reason or another are simply not answerable. Either the question is entirely speculative—e.g., what happens to us after we die?—or the information needed to answer the question is too complex and therefore out of our reach—e.g., how many life-sustaining planets exist in the universe? These are definitely entertaining questions to consider, but they make lousy research questions. The whole goal of academic writing is to make a case for an answer to your questions, so having questions that cannot be answered as the starting point of your writing is not going to be useful.

It is true that in a theological program like here at Iliff you may find yourself arguing questions of faith, and therefore you might find the requirement to provide answers burdensome. It is important to clarify, then, that properly phrasing your questions can provide a solution here.

“What happens to us after we die?” is speculative, while the question “How has Christian theology approached the subjects of death, dying, and the state of the dead?” is not. The second question still provides you with opportunities to weigh in and suggest strengths and weaknesses for various doctrinal positions, but the focus is still clearly on a question that can be answered.

As part of this step, it is also important to make sure that the question you are asking is answerable *in the time you have to finish your paper*. In any given topic there are a plethora of questions that you could ask and answer if you had infinite time. For most assignments, however, you will only have a couple of weeks at most to research and write your paper. Keeping your questions manageable in a timely manner is therefore vital. This brings us to our next point:

Make sure your questions are specific:

You may have noticed in the previous sections that when I changed the research questions the subjects of the questions narrowed. ‘Christianity’ became ‘liberation theologies since the 1970s,’ the generic ‘what happens to us’ became ‘How has Christian theology approached’ the subject. These are both examples of making a research question more specific. Both of the examples still ended on fairly broad topics: it has been 53 years since 1970 and liberation theologies are spread out across the planet, so even with that narrower focus one could go in countless different directions. If you were to try and answer the question, it would probably require a full book-length project to do so. Part of writing a feasible research question, then, is making sure the question is as specific as you can make it while still maintaining its open-endedness. You would want to specify features like locality (where and when is the community you are wanting to study), identity (who are the people you are wanting to research), and issue (what exactly are you wanting to conduct research about). In this way, the question “How have liberation theologies promoted social justice since the 1970s?” can be rewritten to be even more specific by instead asking “How has Black liberation theology in the 21st century United States promoted the just treatment of trans people?” The first question is a book; the second is potentially doable in a 20-page paper. More importantly, the second question is specific enough that you can spend time exploring the nuances of the subject and formulating detailed arguments instead of giving broad answers to a broad question.

With these three pieces in mind, next time you find yourself planning a paper or a research project, start by writing out 3-5 research questions about your topic. Make them as open-ended, answerable, and specific as possible, and then look at how the questions intersect. You might use [mind-mapping, tree diagramming, or linear outlining](#) for this process, but be sure to play with the intersections of your questions.

More information and help for Iliff students may be found at the Iliff Writing Center. Go to library.iliff.edu/writing-center/ for more or contact us at writing@iliff.edu.