Planning – before research

There are two planning stages in every essay. Before commencing research you plan the topic and the research you will need to undertake. Once your research is complete, you plan the argument and which items of research you will use.

Research questions

The “research question” is the topic of your assignment. Most essay topics are phrased as a question. The aim of your essay is to answer that question. It is called a research question because it is the topic you research. Understanding your research question is essential. You can’t get good marks unless you address the question.

A common mistake is failing to read the research question accurately. People often fail to notice qualifying elements which define the topic in more detail.

If your topic is not in the form of a question, try to rephrase it as a question. Framing the topic of your assignment as a question gives you focus and makes research much easier. This will help you understand what you need to talk about.

Research Question Set by Others

In the early years of a university education the research question will be set by your lecturer. You need to think about it carefully. Examine every word. A common error is not to notice a word which qualifies or redefines the topic. Be alert for terms which point at particular aspects of the topic, such as “in the context of.” For example, “discuss Shakespeare’s portrayal of the monarch in the context of Late Tudor attitudes to government” is looking for discussions of the portrayal of monarchy and its issues in plays such as Macbeth. Talking about the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth would be irrelevant unless you could show how this illustrated some aspect of Tudor attitudes to government.

If you are unsure about the question, ask. It is perfectly OK, and considered a sign of a serious student, to discuss the topic with your lecturer. Immediately after the lecture is not the best time for this. Book an appointment with your lecturer, or visit during their consultation hour. However, ensure you have done a little work first. Lecturer’s won’t do your work for you. Instead of “I don’t know what to do,” be sufficiently prepared that you can say something like “It looks like the question is about this, so I was thinking of taking the following approach?” Even if you are completely wrong, your efforts will be noticed, and appreciated.

Setting your own research question

At more advanced levels, you will be able to set your own research question. This is both a blessing and a curse. It means you can pick a topic which is interesting to you. However, if you set a bad research question, it can make things very difficult.

The most common mistake is to set a research question which is too broad. Almost everyone does this. You can’t tackle big themes in a university essay. Since academic writing demands detail, evidence and citations, tackling a big theme requires an entire book. If you take on a big theme in an essay or dissertation, either you will focus on a small aspect of it, or you’ll drift between several aspects. If you focus on a small aspect, that should have been your research question. You’ll lose marks for not addressing other aspects the assessor considers important. If you drift between several aspects, your work will lack focus and you’ll lose marks for being incoherent.

To illustrate the problems with a research question which is too broad, we will now examine an example of a terrible research question:

“What is the influence of Christianity on attitudes to women?” - This question is impossible to answer in any academic essay or dissertation. The problems are numerous:

1. Time: Christianity is over 2,000 years old. Social attitudes to women have changed tremendously over that time. So the first thing any examiner would ask on seeing this question is “when?” If this essay going to tackle the entire history of Christianity, it can’t be about the influence, but must cover the ways influence has changed over 2,000 years.
2. Location: Christianity can be found in every continent on the planet. There are many different Christian societies, with many different attitudes to women. It is impossible to discuss hundreds
of different societies. Even if you wanted to focus on a few, you would have to justify your selections, which would take more space from your essay. In addition, you’d have to show you considered, but rejected, others.

3. **Terminology**: What does it mean for a religion to “influence” an attitude? This could be taken as referring to child socialisation, the incorporation of religious principles into law, the development of cultural tropes, patterns of economic activity, patterns of dress, theological development or dozens of other ways the word ‘influence’ could legitimately be used. ‘Attitude’ is similarly vague. Attitudes are typically considered psychological dispositions, so there must be some reference to empirical evidence of attitudes, such as behaviour, speech, etc. As with location, you would need to first define what you meant by ‘attitude’, what you will consider evidence of attitudes, and provide arguments for both.

A better alternative to this research question would be:

“By what mechanisms did Vatican theology influence the legal position of women in the Irish State from 1930 – 1935?”

The key point is:

*When setting your own research question, be focused and specific.*

**Researching Research Questions**

Before you finalise your research question, do some investigation to determine what sort of research you will have to do to answer it. This need not be a major exercise, but you need to establish how much material is available on your topic and the range of sources. Some areas are dominated by one or two major sources, on which all other work is based. This can make it difficult to find contrasting positions. Other areas, often the most interesting, are so new or obscure there is little material available. Sometimes everything you need is contained inside large or complex sources which will take a great deal of effort to use. In all these cases, you should change the research question to areas where your research time will produce better material.

The aim in determining how much research effort will be required is to ensure you have selected an area where you can focus on understanding and using research material, not spending most of your time finding it. Your essays are not marked for effort, but for what they contain. It doesn’t make any difference whether your essay took 3 days or 3 weeks of research.

*You want your research efforts to be as productive as possible, so design research questions for which there is plenty of easy-to-find material.*