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 is 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.*