

So, you've been assigned a research paper and your professor has said, "you can write about ANYTHING".

At first this might sound exciting. After all, you're a curious person with various interests. You have lots of things you'd love to talk about all day.

But as time creeps towards the deadline you begin to worry - wait - HOW do I turn my interests into an academic question that I can answer for this paper? What even is an academic question?

If you're feeling overwhelmed, that's okay! Getting started can often feel like the hardest part.

Figuring out what your research question is a process.

It might first help to understand the goal of the research paper. While it might seem like they are assigned to torture you, they actually serve a unique and interesting purpose.

We ask academic questions in order to more fully understand the way the world works.

We ask questions about how societies function, how our environment works, how different people experience life differently, and more.

We ask questions find answers to problems. The research paper is an opportunity to learn more about issues that are important to you and contribute to the conversations happening around those issues.

That's all well and good, but how do I know how to ask one of those questions?

It's helpful to reflect on what is important to you. What are scholars talking about in your major? What do you get excited to learn more about? How does that thing intersect with academic disciplines? Your everyday interests have social and cultural influences that you can explore.

If you're still drawing a blank, check out the news. Look into stories that make you wish things were different, and use that as an opportunity to explore the issues more deeply and see how we might work towards solutions.

Once you have an interest you'd like to pursue, think about how to turn it into a question. You might hear things like "it can't be too broad or too narrow".

What that means is that you want to make sure your research question is in the right spot for your given assignment. Think about how much space you have to tackle this idea. For example, if you are writing an 8-10 page paper, you probably won't be able to tackle all of the implications for a question like "How has social media impacted people either positively or negatively?"

And you probably couldn't get 10 pages out of "How many teenagers use social media", because that question can be answered with one source and one statistic.

This makes a big difference in the kind of question you can look into right now.

Once you have a big idea, do a bit of background research on the topic. Go to wikipedia and see what the subcategories are. This will help generate ideas of how to narrow it. It will also give you a general overview of a topic, which can help generate questions. You don't want to cite Wikipedia in your paper, but it's a great place to get inspired. Go ahead and start looking for sources. As you find some information on your topic and build a foundation of knowledge around it, you will start to see what you'd like to add to the conversation.

All of this is to say that finding the perfect research question **takes time**, and it's a process you'll want to revisit as you learn more throughout the research process. The best way to get to a great question is to pick something you're curious about, start reading, and see what inspires you!

As always, keep in touch with your professor to make sure you are following the assignment correctly and meeting all the necessary criteria. If you are having trouble figuring out how to turn your interests into a research paper, reach out to a librarian.