

Chapter 2 The Research Problem

Fraenkel & Wallen

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What is a research problem?

A research problem is the **focus of a research investigation/**

A clear statement in the form of a question of the specific issue that a researcher wishes to answer in order to address a research problem.

Creswell (1994): The **focus** for a study is **the central concept** being examined in a scholarly study.

A **common shortcoming** of beginning researchers is that **they frame their study in complex and erudite (having or showing great learning) language.**

What is a research problem?

Good, sound research projects begin with straightforward, uncomplicated thoughts, easily read and understood.

Creswell (1994) suggests that **the focus of the study** may emerge through an extensive literature review, be suggested by colleagues, researchers, or advisors, or be developed through practical experience.

Wilkinson (1991): Be brief and avoid wasting words.
Make sure it includes the focus or the topic of the study.

What is a research problem?

Creswell (1994) recommends finding a **working title** first, which will undoubtedly will be modified as one proceeds with the research project. Next a decision whether the title is **researchable or not** needs to be made. **One needs criteria** such as the following to make this decision. Here are some questions usually asked by individuals as they plan a study.

- Is the topic researchable, given time, resources, and availability of data?
- Is there a personal interest in the topic in order to sustain attention?
- Will the results from the study be of interest to others (e.g., in the state, region, nation)?
- Is the topic likely to be publishable in a scholarly journal? (or attractive to a doctoral committee?)
- Does the study (a) fill a void, (b) replicate, (c) extend, or (d) develop new ideas in the scholarly literature?
- Will the project contribute to career goals?

What is a research problem?

- Many research problems are stated as questions. The essential characteristic of a researchable question is that there be some sort of information that can be collected in an attempt to answer the question.

Defining Terms in Research

- **Constitutive definition** (lexical meaning of the word or the term)
- **Operational definition** of the term
- **Definition by example**

Research Questions

1. Research questions should be **feasible** - that can be investigated with available resources without spending excessive amount of time, energy or money
2. Research questions should be **clear** – unambiguous, most people would agree on the meaning of the key words in the question
3. Research questions should be **significant** - that is worthy of investigation, any researcher should think through the value of the intended research by asking three important questions: How might answers to thi research question (1) advance knowledge in my field?, (2) improve educational practice?, (3) improve the human condition.

Research Questions

4. Research questions should be **ethical** - that is, it will not be harmful physically or psychologically to human beings or natural or social environment

Research questions often **investigate relationships**- that is two qualities or characteristics are tied together or connected in some way. See the example in the textbook.

Research Questions

My research problem is

.....

My research question is.....

.....

Key terms in the problem/question:

a....., b....., c....., d....., e.....

Operational definition of these terms.....

.....

For discussion

Change the following topics into researchable questions.

1. Class size and student achievement
2. Multilingual education in prep classes
3. Learning styles
4. Testing anxiety

For discussion

1. Is class size related to the student achievement?
2. What are the main linguistic aspects of multilingual education at prep schools?
3. Which style of learning is the most effective in EFL classes?
4. What factors are related to test anxiety among students?

Example

Topic: Influence of teachers' orientations to classroom management on their classroom behaviors students' responses to these behaviors and learning environment in ELT classrooms.

Research questions:

1. How do teachers' orientations to classroom management influence their management behaviors, the students' responses to these behaviors and the learning environment in ELT classes?
2. How do teachers' management behaviors, the students' responses to these behaviors and the learning environment affect each other in ELT classes?

Definition of Terms: classroom management , learning environment ,etc

Example

Topic: How do academics conceive quality in higher education?

Research questions:

1. How do academics perceive the concept of quality?
2. What are academics' views of the quality of the current situation in the higher education institution?
3. What are the academics' views of the quality about the higher education institution they work?

Example

Topic: The effect of reading course on developing reading comprehension of intermediate level students at Bilkent University school of English language

Research questions: (The problem statement)

1. To what extent a newly designed reading course for intermediate level students at English Preparatory School (EPS) has an effect on their achievement in reading comprehension? **(Subproblems?)**
 - Are all the reading skills specified in the BUSEL syllabus emphasized in class?
 - Who do teachers believe should prepare intermediate level reading materials in EPS?
 - What difficulties do teachers believe students at intermediate level at EPS have in reading comprehension?

Definition of Terms: Reading, Skimming, Scanning

The Purpose Statement

Creswell (1994)

The Purpose Statement

- The purpose statement establishes the direction for the study.
- In a journal article the purpose statement is commonly written into introduction, in a dissertation or a dissertation proposal it stands as a separate section.
- The purpose statement captures the essence of a study, therefore it should be written as clearly and concisely as possible.
- The purpose statement, like all components of the research process, needs to be grounded firmly in the paradigm assumptions.

The Purpose Statement

Creswell (1994)

Significance and Meaning of a Purpose Statement

- The purpose statement should provide “a specific and accurate synopsis of the overall purpose of the study” (Locke et al., 1987).
- Fraenkel and Wallen consider the purpose statement as part of the research problem.
- The construction of a good purpose statement is based on the paradigm of study. Qualitative and quantitative purpose statements address similar content, but their precise form and language differ because of the rhetorical and methodological distinctions of each paradigm.

The Purpose Statement

Creswell (1994)

A Qualitative Purpose Statement

A fundamental characteristic of a good qualitative purpose statement is that it implies or expresses the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm, such as the language of qualitative research and the methodology of an emerging design based on experiences of individuals in a natural setting.

Basic Design Features of Writing a Purpose Statement

Use such words as *purpose*, *intent*, and *objective* to call attention to this statement as the central controlling idea in a study. The present or past verb tense of ten is used in journal articles and dissertations; the future tense is used in dissertation proposals because researchers are presenting a plan for a study.

See other suggestions in Creswell.