

From Topic to Research Question

The Role of the Researcher

Since few people read research reports for entertainment, you have to create a relationship that encourages them to see why it's in their interest to read yours. That's not easy. Too many beginning researchers offer readers a relationship that caricatures a bad classroom: Teacher, I know so much less than you, who will give me a grade. So my role is to show you how much information I dug up, and yours is to decide whether I've found enough. Big mistake. Do that and you turn your project into a pointless drill that demeans both you and your teacher. Worse, you cast yourself in a role exactly opposite to that of a true researcher.¹

*The Craft of Research*² encourages to students to “imagine becoming a local expert” on their topic – in fact, switching roles with the teacher. Your student should think that rather than presenting a collection of as many facts as possible for your approval, they've found interesting and *specific* information that they're excited about and have carefully examined.

That's why I feel strongly about formulating a research question. At Level 2, the research question will not be too complex – but it will send students well on their way to achieving an Excellence, and set the precedent that this is a true inquiry – an *investigation* – into their chosen topic. You're not desperately trying to chivy your students along beyond the chronological overview and background information called for in the standard!

Why is a research question essential to the research process? Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process.³

¹ Booth et al (2009). *The craft of research*. University of Chicago Press, p. 14

² *Ibid.*, p. 41

³ George Mason University Writing Center. “How to write a research question.” Retrieved online on 23 February 2016 from <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/wc-quick-guides>

What is a research question?

A research question is:

clear

focused

concise

complex

arguable⁴

As a general rule of thumb, if a quick Google search can answer a research question, it's likely not very effective.⁵

A research question should also not be so broad that it can't be properly addressed by the project.

Choosing and Writing the Research Question

By using the KWHL chart, students have generated questions about a topic that reflect their curiosity. This is a good starting point.

Pilot group C, who chose the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra for their KWHL chart exercise, came up with these questions:

Who are the musicians?
What is the history of the Orchestra? When was it formed and by whom?
How do you get to play with them?
What repertoire do they play?

From these questions, you can guide students to pick out which questions will be a part of their overview and background profile, and which questions are about *specific* information that goes above and beyond to an investigation.

What is the history of the Orchestra? When was it formed and by whom? Safe to say this would be included in the overview.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

What repertoire do they play? Sure, this could be a laundry list taken from old programmes – but how about an evaluation in terms of historical period, repeated works, the frequency (or lack thereof) of works by New Zealand composers and/or contemporary compositions? What about a comparison with the NZSO's rep?

How do you get to play with them? could be an investigation into the audition procedures, the audition repertoire, ethnographic data from interviews with players about their audition experience, the turnover in the orchestra...

Who are the musicians? How about an evaluation of the makeup of the members of the orchestra in terms of nationality, age and performing experience, the practice habits of a few key players, or their professional and personal lives outside of the orchestra?

Just the simple exercise of digging deeper into these questions and imagining possible projects alongside has a noticeable effect on me – IT. IS. REALLY. EXCITING. Can you imagine your students lighting up as they assume the role of the “local expert” – knowing that they have the freedom to investigate an aspect of their choosing, and that when their project is completed, they will know things that very few other people do about their topic? It's a much more energizing prospect than “I have to do a project about _____.”

Final research questions from this exercise could be:

What are the significant characteristics of the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra's performed repertoire between 2011-2016?

What are the professional and personal profiles of a sample of musicians who perform in the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra?

What are the audition procedures and repertoire for the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra, and the audition experience of a sample of players?

Check the question against the characteristics of a good research question

Is it *clear*?

Is it *focused*?

Is it *concise*?

Is it *complex*?

Is it *arguable*?

Some examples of how topics can go to research questions:

Topic: Orchestras in New Zealand

Research Question: How does the APO showcase original New Zealand music?

Topic: The Big Sing

Research Question: What is the significance of classical items versus contemporary items in the 2015 Big Sing?

Topic: How can musicians make money writing songs for other people?

Research Question: How does APRA/AMCOS support NZ musicians?

Topic: Live music in New Zealand

Research Question: How has the earthquake affected two music venues in Christchurch?

“Reverse Topic”: Why do songs need copyright?

Research Question: How does copyright law work for music in New Zealand?

Topic: Tiki Taane

Research Question: How does Tiki Taane represent himself as a Maori artist?

Topic: Creative New Zealand

Research Question: What is the profile of musicians funded by Creative New Zealand in the last five years?

“Reverse Topic”: What does a record label do?

Research Question: What is the significance of the Flying Nun record label in the history of NZ music industry and how do they support musicians today?

Notes:

