

# 23 curious questions for a better dissertation

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## **First step: finding an intriguing puzzle and asking a manageable research question about it**

Force yourself to be as specific, narrow, and analytical as you can. You probably have a broad research topic, but what exactly is puzzling about it? Which of the many questions one can ask about this puzzle (ie: how does it come about, what are its consequences, etc) will be yours? Decide on *one* theme, *one* puzzle, and *one* question. Formulate different possible answers. Your task will be to convince your readers that one of these answers is more compelling than others.

1. Which incident or reading inspired your initial research idea?
2. What exactly *puzzled* you about this incident or reading?
3. Which different *questions* does this puzzle put on the agenda?
4. Which of these questions do you want to answer?
5. How would a potential answer to this question look like?
6. Can readers disagree with that answer, even if they agree with your facts?

## **Second step: embedding the puzzle in the literature and finding shoulders to stand upon**

You are not asking these questions in a void – others have asked before. Do not try to find ‘gaps’ in the literature. Even if they truly exist (and don’t just reflect your lack of knowledge) and are worthy enough to be filled (some exist for a reason), this strategy tells you little about how to do the filling. Instead try to find a study that inspires you and then build upon and tweak it (ie by using a different case, or different way of asking the question, or different methodology, but imitating the rest). You might at this stage have to return to the first step and change your theme, puzzle and question.

7. What larger empirical or theoretical issue is your puzzle an example of?
8. How have other scholars posed and answered your question?
9. What convinces you about their approach, what not, and why?
10. Which one study / paper / book do you want to imitate and why?
11. How would you deviate from and tweak this study for your own purposes?

### **Third step: plotting a viable research design and mapping out a path towards answers**

Now you need to plan how to get from your puzzle to an argument about that puzzle, how to get from your question to an answer. This answer should be nuanced – and readers need to be able to disagree with you even while you are trying to convince them that *your* arguments are more compelling than theirs. How are you going to convince them? You might want to return to the second step to find more inspiration on how to do it, or even to the first step to refine your question.

12. What is the main *difference* you want to explain or understand?
13. What could be three hypothetical explanations for or understandings of this difference?
14. What kind of material do you need to convince readers of either explanation / understanding?
15. Where and from whom are you most likely to obtain that material?
16. What do you need to do to that material to figure out whether it supports your argument?

### **Final step: doing the research, making sense of your data, stepping back, and going in circles**

Before submission, it is important to step back and reflect on the research process. You need to double check that the answer that you give is an answer to the question that you asked (if not, tweak either the question or the answer). You need to specify and reflect on both what you want to say – and where your limits lie. In this process, you will likely circle through all three previous steps again. And again. And then once more. And at the very end, you can finally look ahead!

17. What were your *puzzle, question* and *difference* again? Why did you choose them?
18. What are your respective solution, answer, and explanation / understanding?
19. What would be a good contrasting solution, answer and explanation / understanding?
20. Which of your material does not fit your argument, and what do you do about that?
21. What are good reasons to believe you? Are they clearly stated?
22. What are good reasons *not* to believe you? Are they clearly stated as well?
23. Which new questions, puzzles, differences did you encounter on the way?