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**Formulating Research Questions**

**The purpose of this resource is to provide information about:**

1. **some definitions associated with research; and**
2. **formulating research questions.**

**Definitions: Denscombe 2012**

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| **Terminology** | **Definition** |
| **Aims of research** | * The direction in which the research will go – its targets and the benefits involved. * They also indicate the scale and scope of the proposed investigation. |
| **Research problem and objectives** | * Focuses on what the research is trying to do. * Emphasises on the concrete and an effort to translate the aims into the kind of things that have substance and which take the form of problems to be resolved, issues to be clarified. |
| **Research Questions** | * Show how the research will put things into practice. * They specify what factors and what relationships will be investigated to provide data that will be useful in relation to the research aims and objectives. |

**Note:** Avoid restating the aims when writing the research questions. The research questions should   
 identify specific and relevant things that will be looked at rather than broad ambitions to be   
 aimed for.

**Formulating Research Questions**

Denscombe (2012, pp. 83-84) highlights that formulating research questions is not ‘a one-way journey that travels the logical pathway from beginning to end’:

* People start from a position where they already have an idea of things they need to look at and the nature of the research problem they wish to address.
  + The starting point is the logical process and they are not starting with a blank sheet.
* The formulation of research questions tends to be an iterative (cyclical) process in which the eventual aims and research questions are the end-product of going back and forth, visiting and revisiting relevant ideas and issues.
  + The aims and research questions are adjusted and synchronised in a sequence of modifications (see Figures 1 and 2).

[](http://www.google.pt/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=transparent+funnel&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&docid=pnlaaR_2gPBiFM&tbnid=Et__hq1f7M2tyM:&ved=0CAUQjRw&url=http://www.dhgate.com/wholesale/plastic+funnels.html&ei=VKD4UYz6D8SLkQWNroDQDQ&bvm=bv.49967636,d.dGI&psig=AFQjCNGNIpRDeiI1b2x8iKfty3QKkxFnfw&ust=1375334831960670)

**Research Questions**

Figure 1. The iterative process of formulating research questions (Denscombe 2012,   
 p. 84)

* Within the eventual research proposal the rationale for the questions, propositions or hypotheses must be presented as a narrative that is quite neat, logical and easy to follow.
* The research questions that are eventually presented in the research proposal must have an obvious relevance to the aims of the research.
  + This relevance should be made clear through the arguments developed in the Background and/or Literature Review sections of the proposal.

**Aims (where the research will go)**

**Research problems or objectives (What the research will do)**

**Research questions (What the research will look at)**

Figure 2. Narrowing the focus of  
 research (Denscombe 2012, p. 83)

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| **Components** |  | **Example** |  | **Comment** |
| **AREA** |  | Employment and work motivation |  | General area of interest (e.g. a sub-area of a discipline, or a work-related concern). |
| **TOPIC** | Absence from work |  | Specific topic of concern from within the general area |
| **LITERATURE REVIEW** | Absence rates are related to pay and job satisfaction as well as other factors, such as job security, work conditions, health and safety at work, worker morale, career and promotions |  | What is already known about the topic? Background research to identify the key issues and existing knowledge about the topic. |
| **RESEARCH AIMS** | * To investigate how rates of absenteeism are linked with levels of pay and levels of job satisfaction. * To gauge how far rates of absenteeism can be reduced through changes to the pay structure and changes to the levels of job satisfaction. * To explore the link between these factors in the context of lower-paid workers. |  | * These are statements about the general purpose of the research. They are relatively non-specific, abstract indications of where the research is going – its ambitions, its targets, its goals. * It is ‘all about’ absenteeism, pay and job satisfaction. |
| **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES** | * To apply existing knowledge about the relationship between rates of absenteeism and levels of pay and job satisfaction to the specific situation of low-paid workers in the UK retails sector with a view to finding appropriate means for reducing absenteeism. * To focus on employees in three case study companies as a good example from which to draw more general conclusions. |  | * Here is a statement about what the research will do. * It will use existing knowledge, apply it to a particular context, and develop new knowledge that can have a practical value. |
| **RESEARCH QUESTIONS** | * Is there a statistical correlation between levels of pay and absenteeism among employees working for the three case study retailers? * What is the profile of employees working in the shops (age, sex, etc.)? * Do certain kinds of workers have higher absenteeism rates than others? * Are certain kinds of employees more frustrated by their work role than others, and is this correlated with a tendency to take days off work? * What reasons do employees give for being absent from work? * What aspirations do the shop workers have in terms of intrinsic rewards from the job and career progression? * To what extent is job satisfaction related to levels of pay? |  | * These are the questions that the research will actually ask to find out what it wants to know. * They focus on specific key indicators and relevant factors on which information is needed. |

Source adapted from: Denscombe (2012, p. 85)  
 Denscombe, M 2012, Research proposals: a practical guide, McGraw-Hill Education, Maidenhead.