RESEARCH PROBLEM/QUESTION(S)

Wisdom begins in wonder.
                                      --Socrates

*[C]ontexts and questions . . . should guide our methodological decisions, whatever they might be. . . .
While place might determine what research methods are <u>possible</u>, the research question determines what
research methods are <u>necessary.</u>*
                                      --Cindy Johanek *Composing Research* (2, 3)

*Disciplinary breakthrough comes when the form of the question itself is challenged, and that can only
occur, we argue, by installing methodological reflexivity – what Bourdieu (1988, p. 15) calls
"epistemological vigilance" – into the very act of framing the question.*
                                      --Patricia Sullivan and James Porter *Opening Spaces* (5)

*The subject of academic writing either already is or is soon turned into a problem before the writer
proceeds. No matter how tentative the solutions are, it is problem-solving that generates all academic
writing.*
                                      --Susan MacDonald *"Problem Definition in Academic Writing"* (316)

Assignment: This assignment gives you an opportunity to begin to develop a research
problem and question(s) that will guide your review of relevant research in the area,
and that will eventually lead to your designing a study to explore the research problem
and writing a research proposal. It is the first part of the three-part sequence for the
major project in this class.

There are **TWO parts** to this assignment: 1) draft your research problem as a question or
set of questions, and 2) write a brief (one page or less) reflection on:

   • what led you to this question(s),

   • what your assumptions are concerning the question,

   • what you are finding or not finding as you begin to explore the question(s) in
the research literature

   • why you are interested in this question

Bring a **working draft** of your research question(s) and one-page reflection to class on
     Monday, September 22

Final Draft (Questions & One-Page Reflection) Due: Monday, September 28

As Janice Lauer and William Asher note, "for problem formulation to be effective, the
questions posed must be compelling enough to sustain extended and arduous inquiry.
They must also fit the investigator's research capabilities and, if answered, must make a
contribution to the field, falling within the realm of those problems deemed significant
and unresolved" (*Composition Research* 9). In short, the marks of a good research

problem (and questions) are that it is *significant*, *doable* and *makes a contribution*. To balance these complex, and competing, qualities, you need a set of strategies to help you define a research area, construct a problem and a set of effective questions. The following is meant as heuristics to guide you in this process.

Suggestions for Selecting and Defining a Research Problem

1. *Identify problem area.* What area relates best to your current interests and future professional goals?

   • Write down what type of work you want to do after graduate school as well as specific aspects of the work that interest you.

   • Which graduate courses, problems, and readings have caught your attention?

   • Keep a notebook for listing ideas, questions, and problems that emerge from your readings and class discussions in various courses. (This process can yield important insights for current and future projects.)

   • Identify moments of motivating dissatisfaction (claims you disagree with, questions left unanswered, clashes between different scholarly positions, etc.).

   • Review editorial policies in current issues of scholarly journals related to your field of interest to get an overview of the topics and methods the journals are calling for.

   • Examine the discussion and/or conclusion sections of other publications for calls for "further research needed."

   • Don't seize on the first research problem you encounter; give your choice careful thought and study—maintain what Bourdieu terms "epistemological vigilance." Be open.

2. *Build a preliminary knowledge base.* Read sources (prior literature) in your problem area to get an overview of what is known and what questions need further exploration. Look for "gaps" in the literature. Look for aspects of the problem that have not yet been addressed or that have been questionably explored. Pay special attention to conclusions where authors often note areas of needed research.

   Try to locate articles or other sources that synthesize or review a significant body of research in your area of interest. (Hint: Look for the phrase "Review of the Literature" or "Literature Review" in the title of the article. For example, Harsanyi, Martha A. "Multiple Authors, Multiple Problems—Bibliometrics and the Study of Scholarly Collaboration: A Literature Review." *Library and Information Science Research* 15 (1993): 325-354.) Not all literature review articles say so in the title. For example, Spivey, Nancy Nelson. "Construing

Constructivism: Reading Research in the United States." *Poetics* 16 (1987): 169-92 reviews scholarly literature on constructivist theories and research.

Also see journals such as the *Review of Educational Research*--and other publications devoted to printing literature review articles. If you were interested in the use of collaborative techniques in writing classes, for example, you might look at: DiPardo, Anne, and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretical Foundations and New Directions." *Review of Educational Research* 58 (1988): 119--49.

Also see annotated bibliographies on your topics. (*Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, for example, publishes these regularly on a variety of topics.)

Check the Web for annotated bibliographies, papers, position statements and so on.

3. *Identify a specific problem and write a problem statement and research question(s).* What do you want to know? What question(s) will address this area? What (people, artifacts, practices, etc.) do you want to study? Why is this problem or question important? Is it a significant question and will it make a contribution to the field? Is it doable?

Characteristics of Research Question:

1. It is written in clear, non-technical language and stimulates readers' interest.
2. It is limited in scope so that it is manageable.
3. It is carefully fitted into a broader context of current theory and research.
4. It is phrased in such a way that readers have a sense of what is needed to answer it. (That is, it tends to be phrased in operational terms.)

4. *Review previous research.* Read the prior research more carefully and thoroughly. Locate, evaluate, and synthesize previous research and theory. Remember that you are not looking for evidence to support a claim; you are reading to gain a sense of the lay of the scholarly land. Relate your synthesis to your problem or question(s). (Secondary sources can give you a good start on building a reading list of research. Electronic and paper searches are also important. Another valuable source is to talk with professors and colleagues who may be able to recommend readings.)

5. *Be flexible.* The process is not nearly as orderly as the above heuristic suggests. You will find yourself working back and forth between your question and your review of the literature. Share your questions and problem statements with colleagues to help you shape them.