Advice on question design for investigations

This video supports students to design a question for their investigation and research across a range of subjects as part of their SACE. Investigation type tasks require the development of many skills. Some students can find it difficult to get started and begin a process of choosing a topic from which they can develop a research question. This video can be used in conjunction with the existing SACE documents to provide advice and strategies for guiding students towards designing a question. A well-developed and refined question will provide the opportunity for in-depth analysis of their topic allowing them to demonstrate evidence of their learning at the highest standard.

Strategies for getting started

Think about the course that we just did with healthy foods and different cultures, I want you to think about that parts of the course you have enjoyed the most.

I really liked the stuff we did about healthy food.

That’s good, that gives you somewhere to start and it is also relevant to the topic which is fantastic. What in particular did you enjoy about working with healthy foods?

I liked looking at the ingredients of different foods and their nutritional values.

Very good, is there anything else that you enjoyed about the topic?

I enjoyed studying the different ways of encouraging people to eat healthily.

That sounds like you've got some really good ideas to investigate. I think it would be worthwhile for you to write these ideas down and rank them in order.

Yeah I think I can.

It can be helpful to visualise your topic using a mind map. Mind mapping can help you to organise your ideas and it may help you to identify any links between your ideas. These links can in turn help you to formulate a question for your investigation.

Narrowing your topic

You can apply these questions to each of the topics you initially identified and this may help you to choose between them. Each of the questions in this diagram can help you to narrow your topic. However, bear in mind than not all of these questions may apply to the subject you are completing this investigation for.

Alternatively, this diagram can be used as a tool for refining your topic and generating a question from it. Try applying this to your topic.

Once you have settled on a topic it is a good idea to do some background reading and internet research. This will give you a good idea of how much information is available and how researchable your topic is. Importantly, it may also raise questions which you would like answered and these could form the basis of your investigation. Although this research is only to help you in your question development, it is beneficial for you to conduct worthwhile research as it is likely you will use these sources again in the research stage. The Locating Evidence sheet is a useful tool for internet searches and gives useful advice on how to carry out an effective web search. The Evaluating Sources sheet will help you to evaluate the usefulness of websites and web articles. The Academic note-taking sheets will help you record evidence from the sources you use and will then form the basis for your in-text referencing and reference list or bibliography.

FINER

Before you go off and start investigating your topics in a lot of detail, one thing I want you to do is reflect and question if your topic can become an investigation question and one tool that we’ve got that you can use to help with that process is a thing called FINER. Now FINER is an acronym. The first letter is F which stands for feasible – is the actual topic that you’re investigating going to have enough time. Are you going to have enough time to investigate the question? Are you going to have enough time to do thorough investigation? Will you meet the deadlines set by the learning requirements? The second letter is I – I stands for interest or interesting. Do you have a genuine interest and genuine passion for this topic? If not, will you lose interest quickly? Will it become boring to you? N is for Novel – possibly could you find some new and novel information about the topic not being found before through investigations. The fourth letter is E which stands for ethical. If you think you’re going to go to jail then don’t do it. Will you be safe? Will anybody be offended? Is the answer is yes to being offended or unsafe then maybe rethink your topic for investigation. Lastly it’s R – R is for relevance. Do you think through this investigation you’ll meet the learning requirements? That’s so important, if you do not meet the learning requirements then do not attempt this topic. Any questions?

Reflect and review

It is important that students reflect on and review their question as their research progresses. In the first instance the question determines the data which should be collected. In some cases, analysis of the data can provide a new focus for the investigation and the question should be altered accordingly. Students shouldn't be frightened to alter or further refine their question. Indeed, they should be actively encouraged to allow their question to change in response to their data collection and analysis. It’s also a worthwhile exercise for students to recheck their title once the investigation is complete to ensure that the question has been answered. Even at this late stage it is appropriate to change the title if necessary.

For further advice for designing a question, take a look at range of supporting documents that are available on the SACE website.