Consideration and refinement of a research question

IDENTIFY an area of interest by thinking about:

- your learning and activities at school (subjects, courses, extra-curricular activities)
- your learning and activities outside school (hobbies, part-time job, interests)
- future plans (further study, work directions, ambitions)
- something you have always wanted to explore.

Is the area of interest ethical and appropriate?

CONSIDER a research question that:

- is 'new' learning — a well-designed question gives you the opportunity to learn something new
- is personally challenging and manageable within the time frame
- has the potential to lead to some 'key findings'.

Is the research question researchable? — Where will you find your information?

REFINE your research question to:

- clearly express what your research is about
- provide a focus to guide your investigation
- allow you to use appropriate research processes (valid, ethical, manageable).

REFINING PROCESS — EXAMPLE

Draft 1: **Why is there a mystery about the ship the *Mary Celeste*?**

- Leads you towards a description of the mystery
- *However*, it lacks focus on the 'truth', i.e. the best possible theory for the mystery.

Draft 2: **What are the theories regarding the disappearance of the crew of the *Mary Celeste*?**

- Narrows question to focus on theories
- *However*, it only requires you to outline each theory
- *Can be further refined* to invite an analytical, rather than a descriptive, approach.

Refined research question: **To what extent is mutiny the most likely cause of the abandonment of the ship the *Mary Celeste*?**

- Allows you to show your thinking about the theories
- Asking 'to what extent', requires a considered judgment about the mutiny theory in the context of other theories
- Enables demonstration of higher-order thinking skills, depth of knowledge and understanding of the theories.

Question types to avoid

- Questions that lead to descriptive and narrative answers, such as those with a 'What' starter, e.g. 'What is a sand storm?', and those that are self-evident, e.g. 'How to become a _____' or 'What are the different types of _____?'
- Questions that are too broad, e.g. 'What is space?', which lead to brief coverage of many areas
- Questions that invite responses that confirm students' prior knowledge of a topic rather than demonstrate their learning.

Use an open-ended question

Closed question: 'Is obesity going to cost Australia?'
- Invites a simplistic yes/no response
- Limits the research.

Open-ended question: 'What are the social costs of the increase of obesity to Australia?'
- Invites an insightful response
- Allows extensive research, e.g. investigation of financial, employment, educational, social activity, and medical costs
- Allows a variety of research methodologies to be used.

Some useful question stems include:

- How useful …?
- How valuable …?
- How accurate …?
- How important …?
- To what extent …?
- How reliable …?

REFINED QUESTION — EXPLAINED

How accurately does the Baz Luhrmann film *The Great Gatsby* represent the clothing fashions of the 1920s?

How accurately does the Baz Luhrmann film *The Great Gatsby* *(invites an argument that can be researched and does not promote description)* represent the clothing fashions *(clear purpose, refined and narrow enough to be manageable)* of the 1920s? *(specific focus — parameters of place and/or time defined)*