Common Dissertation Research Question Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Half the work of writing a dissertation is getting a good topic with good research questions. Poor questions will lead to time wasted on dead-end studies. Your committee chair will guide you in developing good research questions. Make sure to take that guidance to heart. Your chair has your best interests in mind, and is only trying to help you avoid the mistakes that others have made.

Here are some common dissertation research question errors and how to avoid them.

Mistake #1: “Yes” or “No” Question

**Poor Questions**
1. Do performance-based pay systems for school teachers improve student achievement?
2. Is there a relationship between the cost of foods with high fructose corn syrup and obesity in rural communities in the Midwest United States?

Research questions should not be answerable with a “yes” or “no” because a “yes” or “no” does not tell you much about the subject being investigated. Knowing that performance-based pay systems for school teachers either do or do not improve student performance is just the first step. It is important to learn How or Why such systems do or do not improve student performance. These questions are more informative in that they lead to a deeper understanding of the subject and can lead to action or more research down the line.

**Better Questions**
1. To what extent, if any, do performance-based pay systems for school teachers improve student achievement?
2. How does the price of foods with large amounts of fructose corn syrup influence obesity in children ages three to twelve in Midwest United States rural communities?

Mistake #2: Research Question vs. Survey/Interview Question

**Poor Questions**
1. What do you think is the most important issues facing the residents in our neighborhoods today?: a) drugs b) gangs c) poverty d) education e) health care f) family engagement g) extracurricular activities h) employment or i) other?
2. Do you think police officers should wear body cameras?

It is easy to confuse research questions with survey/interview questions. The questions above are interview questions—they are the questions that you will ask subjects in your interview or survey. They are not the underlying questions that you are trying to answer with those survey/interview question. Your goal is to answer the underlying research questions, and survey/interview questions are the tool used to answer research questions, they are not the research questions themselves.
Better Questions

1. How do wealthy and poor neighborhoods differ in their views of the biggest problems in their city?
2. To what extent, if any, do body cameras lead to more ethical behavior on the part of Miami police?

Mistake #3: Too Many Variables

Poor Question
1. What are the effects of attitudes of millennials towards perceptions of virtual meetings?

It is important to limit the number of variables being measured in a study because too many variables make it hard to connect one variable to another. There are too many things being measured by this question. To answer it you must first catalogue the many attitudes of millennials, then catalog their many perceptions of virtual meetings, and then determine how the various attitudes are connected to the various perceptions. This makes for many correlations to track. It is better to pick a single attitude and a single perception to measure.

Better Question
1. For millennials, what is the relationship between their level of impatience and their perception of the effectiveness of virtual meetings?

Mistake #4: Controversial Assumptions

Poor Questions
1. How does the failure of import tariff policies diminish trade with developing countries?
2. To what extent does widespread prejudice by school teachers undermine immigrant achievement?

It is important to not appear biased in your study such that you are attempting to establish a conclusion using a controversial premise. You might establish a controversial conclusion, but must do it on solid footing.

Better Questions
1. To what extent, if any, do import tariffs on Mexican goods influence trade with Mexico?
2. How do the attitudes of elementary school teachers influence immigrant achievement?

Mistake #5: Overly broad topic

Poor Questions
1. What are the causes of business failure?
2. What makes for a good leader?

The questions above are far too broad to be answered in a dissertation. There are a variety of factors related to each question and an enormous literature base to review before getting started. Trying to answer these broad questions is sometimes termed “Boiling the ocean.” Instead, a dissertation needs to be narrowly focused so that there are a limited number of
variables to examine, and a literature that is sufficient to get going, but not so big that it is impossible to review.

**Better Questions**
1. How do supply chain management challenges contribute to business failure?
2. What are the dominant characteristics of successful managers in the food service industry?

**Mistake #6: Data collection is too difficult**

**Poor Questions**
1. What do NFL owners think are the major challenges facing the league in the future?
2. How do FBI agents view the organizational structure of the agency?

Any study gathering data from a survey needs to target an audience that can be identified, reached, and is willing to respond to questions in sufficient numbers to reach statistically significant results. While NFL owners are easy to identify, few, if any, will spend time answering a survey from someone they do not know. It also seems unlikely that it will be easy to find a list of FBI agents, and even more unlikely that they will be willing to discuss the organizational structure of their agency.

**Better Questions**
1. How have reports of player injuries influenced the training practices of high school football coaches?
2. What are the primary motivators of employment persistence among Federal employees?

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