Step 1: Research question

The first step is perhaps the most important one. You determine what you want to know and translate this into a query. This question is the starting point and foundation of your search. You will learn how to do this and what to look out for when clarifying the assignment and asking a good query.

- [Simple and complex questions](#)

- [Clarifying the assignment](#)

- [Orientate on the subject](#)

- [Limiting the scope of your topic](#)

- [Research question](#)

- [Subquestions](#)

Simple and complex questions

You may have to deal with different types of questions, ranging from simple research questions to complex research questions. Roughly speaking, you can distinguish between three types of questions.

1. **Practical (search) question**

This is a specific, simple question: you are looking for an unambiguous factual answer. Simple does not always mean that the answer is easy to find. It is important that the facts are correct. The choice of a good, reliable source of information is therefore essential.
Example: "What were Heineken's turnover figures in 2018?"

2. **Question for orientation**

If you have a question for orientation on your subject, you don't look very specifically. You explore the subject across the board to find out what you really want to investigate. You want to form a global picture, the question is of a general nature. You will also explore some aspects of your question in practice.

Example:
You want to investigate the effect of nutrition on sports performance. You do feel that the subject is very broad. Your questions for orientation will be, for example:

- What is known about sport and nutrition?

- What is known about nutrition and performance?

As the image becomes clearer, your orientation questions will also become more specific.

3. **Research question**

A research question is more complex. You do more in-depth research and the question is more specific. In order to be able to answer the question correctly, you need to ask subquestions. Use a step-by-step plan for a research question, and a structured approach is important to achieve good results.
Example: "What influence does the consumption of coffee have on the study success of students?"

Clarifying the assignment

The search for information often starts with an assignment. It is important to clarify this task: what exactly is the intention and what result is expected?

So first you look at what you need information for (information needs) and what the frameworks are. This allows you to quickly determine how global or in-depth you are going to search. Think of the following points:

What is the context in which you seek information?

> Are you working on a large research project or do you need to look up something for your internship assignment?

What are the learning objectives for the assignment?

> Is the aim to be able to carry out a thorough (literature) study or is it an introduction to a subject?

On what will you be assessed? What are the requirements for your research?

> These may include requirements for the use of sources.

What is your target group (if publication is the goal)?

> Do you write for academics or for high school students? Are they peers or not?

How extensive should your research report be?

> For a detailed report you will do more in-depth research than for a short report.

How much time and what resources do you have?

> Do you have to submit a report within three weeks or do you have three months? To which sources do you have access?

Orientate on the subject

If the main lines and frameworks of the assignment are clear, explore the possibilities of the subject. Search broadly for information on the subject, be guided by information you find. Create a mind map. Place the subject on which the question is to be formulated in the middle. Then you add all kinds of information about the subject and relate this information to each other. During this exploratory search phase, you will get an increasingly clear picture of the subject. This helps you to define your subject and eventually formulate specific queries.

To orientate yourself on the subject you can:

- Use a search engine. Think of Google or Google advanced

- Consult encyclopaedias to clarify terms or concepts. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia.
- Read magazines and newspapers for trends and current affairs. Think of the database Nexis Uni
- Using the Snowball method or Citation Search (see step 4 search methods) to view related documents
- Go to Website and catalogue Saxion Library
- Consult experts

Limiting the scope of your topic

After the orientation you will have a better idea of the possibilities of the subject. Determine which aspects of the subject you will and will not deal with. This will prevent the subject from becoming too broad and getting lost when looking for information.

After the orientation you will have a better idea of the possibilities of the subject. In the orientation phase you can ask yourself the following questions:

- For whom does the question matter? For yourself (private), or for a client (business)?
- Are you looking for factual information or are you more interested in different opinions and views on your subject?
- How much time and resources do you have and how extensive should your research report be?

Example:
You want to do research on "Problems with Childcare services".
This is still very general and vague. By orienting yourself, you notice that you are mainly interested in problems that arose after the privatisation of the market in 2012. And in fact mainly the consequences for waiting lists. You have already delimited by choosing:

- The Dutch market
- Period from 2012 onwards
- Problems arising from privatisation
- Impact of privatisation on waiting lists

Research question

A good research question gives answers to questions such as
 who, what, where, *when* and *how*.
A good question can be recognized by the following aspects:

- The question is clear. The terms in the question are also clear.
- The question is specific. After all, you want to be able to search specifically. If the question is too general, broad and poorly defined, it is easy to get lost in a mash of information.
- The question is relevant. The answer to the question should therefore contribute directly to the solution of your "information problem" and the achievement of your goal.
- The question is "open". So it is not a question to which only "yes" or "no" can be the answer. Start your question with: "how, what, where" and so on.

Only when you have formulated a specific question that gives direction to the search process and makes clear what exactly you want to know, you can search in a targeted and effective way.

Subquestions

In the case of more complex problems, it is necessary to divide your research question into a number of subquestions. These subquestions relate to aspects of your central question. By zooming in on the subaspects, answering your central question becomes manageable.

Three rules apply to the formulation of subquestions:

1.   All subquestions together provide a direct answer to your central question
2.   The subquestions are logically derived from the central question
3.   The subquestions may not contain any new subjects or assumptions.

Example: Use of coffee and study success

Situation:
Saxion deans want to know what the positive and negative effects are on the study success of the students.

Main question:
What influence does the consumption of coffee have on the students' study success?

Possible subquestions:

1.   What is study success?
2.   What is the influence of different types of coffee?
3.   What active ingredients are contained in coffee?
4.   How does this affect your brain?