

In academic writing, it is essential to clarify which specific part of your topic you are examining in your paper. A research question and a hypothesis help you find and maintain focus, and guide your readers' expectation of what your paper will (and will not) cover. If you struggle to pin these down, try answering the following questions:

1. Name the topic (= what am I writing about?)

"I am examining / working on / writing about ..."

Example: I am writing about medium-sized companies in Germany...

2. Incorporate the question (= what do I want to know?)

"... because I want to understand / find out / investigate ..."

Example: ... because I want to find out how common measures for optimizing personnel management are designed...

3. Define the aim of your analysis (= why do I want to know this?)

"... in order to determine / test / find out ..."

Example: ... in order to determine whether these measures correspond to the categories of a modern corporate culture.

4. Rephrase your answer for step 2 as a question (be as specific as possible):

Example: How are the usual measures for optimizing personnel management designed in medium-sized companies in Germany?

5. Now rephrase your answer for step 3 by completing the following sentence:

"The aim of this paper is ..."

Example: "... to determine whether the measures to optimize personnel management of medium-sized companies in Germany correspond to the categories of modern corporate culture.

6. Use your previous answer to derive a working hypothesis by completing the sentence:

"According to the current state of research on the topic, this paper hypothesizes that..."

Example: "... in most cases, measures to optimize the personnel management of medium-sized companies in Germany do not correspond to the categories of modern corporate culture."

Here are some suggestions on how to proceed after you have completed the steps above:

- Ask your professors/supervisors for feedback and/or sign up for an individual writing consultation with us to further clarify your research question.
- Take another look at the sources and materials you intend to use for your writing assignment. How will they help you to answer your research question? (Re-)phrase your expectation and include a brief explanation when citing from these sources in your paper (e.g. "Article A provides a comparison of aspects X and Y, which is crucial for understanding ...")
- Think about what effect a change in your research question will have on other areas of your writing assignment. (See our handout "The Cornerstones of a Writing Assignment")
- Read the handout "Flash Exposé" and use it to write your own exposé (if you haven't already done so).

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Sources:

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