

How to Start Your Research Project

Written by Mudjia Rahardjo

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(Lecture Material on Research Methodology for Under-graduate and Post-graduate Students)

Though books, academic papers, and journals on research methodology are quite a lot in number and available in university libraries and most graduate students have learnt it before, questions on *How to Start the Research Project*, from the simplest to the most difficult ones, still appear and seem even to increase from day to day. For me it is good, since many more students or even professionals from various kinds of institutions --- schools, companies, non-governmental organizations, governments --- have been much concerned with research issues. Many of them have been engaged in research activities for a variety of reasons. For some local governments, research results have been used as a policy making decision.

However, research methodology is not an easy discipline, rather it is a very complicated because it involves several other disciplines. Students undertaking research methodology need a serious attention. Besides, this discipline grows fast, various perspectives are introduced which results in new approaches and methods. Many more new books on research methodology are also published.

However difficult it is, it does not mean that it cannot be studied and practiced. Quoting Catherine Dawson (2009), I introduce a very useful way to remember to start research project by posing questions using 5 w's, namely:

1. What ?
2. Why?
3. Who?
4. Where?
5. when ?

Those w's questions must be answered first before moving on the 'How' question. The following is the detail of the questions.

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1. What does 'what' mean? Research project can never be done well unless the question 'what' is not answered yet. The 'what' question covers the area of the research project, including whether the topic to be studied is within the area of the discipline. It must be answered as specifically as possible. This is one of the hardest job for beginning researchers who usually want to know everything. The research project often fails because the researchers cannot indentify the area of the research in a specific way. 'The topic of my research is about education management', 'My research is about sociolinguistics', 'Mine is about social class', are just few examples of unspecific topics, and, therefore, cannot be researched. They are too general, while research topics need to be specific and narrow. Otherwise, they cannot be researched. So, narrowing down the topic after having the area of the research is another important step at the very beginning of the research project.

2. After the 'what' question is answered, the next step is to answer the 'why' question, that is 'why do you conduct a research project?'. Is it for academic purposes to write a thesis or dissertation, or is it because you are assigned to do so by your boss, your institutions, or you are to obtain fund from donators. Each has different consequences, in terms of time spent, budget needed, and the way to make a research report. For academic reasons, research reports have been formally designed by experts. While research for obtaining funds, the report must meet their needs. However, out of those answers, there must be another reason why you conduct your research. It covers the following:

- 1). the topic is of your interest,
- 2) .there is an academic gap you find in literature
- 3). to make a decision or public policy.

When your research topic has been fixed, discuss and inform it to your tutors or seniors, fellow students or friends. Ask them their opinions about the topic and try to get insight from it. It is also worth considering to ask if any of them has been familiar with the previous researches similar to your own or if he has any references relevant to your topic.

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3. 'Who question' follows the 'what' and 'why' questions. The 'who' question involves who will be your research participants (informants, respondents and populations), how many will be involved, what type of people are they, and are they possible to be contacted any time you need? Defining the number of participants in the quantitative study is very essential because the quantitative research method emphasizes representative sampling of the populations. It is believed that if the sample is properly chosen using the correct procedure, it is possible to generalize the results to the whole of the research populations.

However, in qualitative research you need not worry with the number of informants, but rather with the type of participants needed to explore the issues. Because a qualitative research method is not a sampling research to get the general pattern of the topic or the phenomena, but to catch the complexity and uniqueness of a single case, defining the research participants is of great importance and cannot just be denied. Bear in mind that improper participants will result in insufficient research outcome. On the other hand, however, choosing the right informants with the right research procedure is possible to uncover the complexity and uniqueness of the project issue as expected.

4. The 'Where question' is another important step to follow. Think of geographical matter of your research, especially for a field research project. Answering the 'where question' is also important to narrow down the topic. To be also considered is whether you will conduct the research in laboratory, or elsewhere. A researcher also needs to put into account the available resources, academically and financially, sometimes politically especially when engaging in policy researches of the government. Due to this fact, choosing the research location not far from where the researcher lives is allowed, as long as it does not disturb the research substance academically.

5. When all those 'w's questions have been identified, the final step is to answer the 'when' question, namely 'When are you going to do your research?'. Answering this question means you are managing your time scale when to start and finish the project. A researcher must commit to the time scale he has made, as otherwise a lot of changes might happen during the research process. When dealing with qualitative studies, time change must be put into consideration tightly as it might change the research focus and interest.

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Time scale is also useful when the project involves a lot number of participants (informants and respondents). A researcher must make a time appointment with participants when to conduct interviews or distribute questionnaires. Interviews and questionnaires cannot be done anytime a researcher likes. Certain qualitative research methods even choose a certain moment to obtain data to meet with the research focus and objectives. It is believed that different time might result in different research findings. Besides, longer time of research activity will surely spend more energy and budget.

A Closing remark:

When the 5 'w' questions have been answered, then move on to the HOW QUESTIONS. This is a scientific and philosophical question as it is concerned with methodological matters. It covers the following:

1. what kind of a research paradigm to use, (positivism or interpretivism)
2. what kind of a research method to be used (quantitative or qualitative)
3. what is the objective of the research (explain the variables or understand a certain issue or phenomena)
4. what are the methods to obtain and analyze data.

(This part on methodology will be presented in another chapter)

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Atlantis Hotel, Spencer Street 300,

Melbourne, Australia