

Framing a problem or need as a research project

Once you've identified a client and received informal consent from the contact, you should begin a fact-finding dialogue with them about how this project can help improve the mission of that organization.

- Begin by listing the services, products, mission, activities, or characteristics of this organization
- Which aspects "have problems" or do not meet the expectations of the client, the client's customers, industry expectations, etc?

Remember, research can be pro-active too, or help an organization to strategically improve its services, define new goals, or adapt to industry and technological trends. There's no such thing as a perfect organization. If you have trouble identifying a problem about the "status quo," or the current state of the organization, begin by exploring what "should be," or how to improve seemingly "problem-free" aspects of the organization.

- *How* do other organizations do "X"? (e.g., use the web)
- *Should* the organization do "X"? (e.g., have an e-business strategy)
- *What* would improve "X"? (e.g., our current e-business strategy)

Define the problem as a research question

Once you've identified a problem- or need-based topic, you need to articulate a researchable problem. A researchable problem is one that is framed as an open-ended **guiding research question**. The "how," "should," and "what" questions above are examples. Defining the problem as a research question helps you focus your activity on answering the question. Scientists have done this for centuries, using the scientific method to articulate a hypothesis in the form of a question that is then verified through experimentation. This straightforward, systematic way of creating new knowledge has led to the explosion of knowledge in the arts and sciences.

Guide to Formulating a Primary Research Question

- Write out three versions of a question focused on exploring the problem or need you identified. Try using different journalistic question words—who, what, where, when, why, and how.

<i>How</i>	Prompts procedural questions	"How can Acme improve its mail sorting system?"
<i>What</i>	Prompts comparisons and lists	"What electronic mail sorting system is best for Acme?"
<i>Why</i>	Prompts cause/effects questions	"Why is the Acme mail system not working?"
<i>When</i>	Prompts timing questions	"When should Acme upgrade its mail sorting system?"
<i>Where</i>	Prompts questions of location	"Where should the mail sorting duties be located in Acme?"
<i>Who</i>	Prompts lists of players, participants	"Who is affected by Acme's inefficient mail system?"

- Be sure the form of the question includes reference to the client organization
- Be sure the question is the *primary-question* (secondary questions are those questions that need to be answered before the primary, or overarching question can be answered)
- Be sure each question is *open-ended*, or not easily answered by yes or no
- Be sure the question is *not* biased, or implying a preferred answer (e.g., Why should Acme Insurance choose PowerPoint over Corel Presentations 10? *This question is biased; it assumes PowerPoint is the better choice!*)
- Choose the form that you feel will yield the best information
- Once you've chosen a question, re-evaluate it using the criteria of access, willingness, benefit, interest, and significance
- Be sure the problem is **manageable** in the time allotted for the project, that it is: (1) not too simple or too complex for a group of 403 students, and (2) can be researched adequately in a 4-5 week period

You will need to argue the feasibility of the problem as you've defined it in your proposal using the above criteria.

Example: Secondary Research Questions that Support Your Primary Question

- You have gone with the “how” route and have select the procedural question “How can Acme improve its mail sorting system?” as your primary research question. This question might prompt the following secondary research questions:

How does the system operate currently?
Who are the key players or personnel in the current system?
What problems exist in the current system?
What individuals, units or departmental operations are negatively impacted by the existing problems?
What individuals, units or departmental operation would be involved in making changes to the system?
What options exist for resolving the problems?
How have other companies resolved similar problems?
What are the industry’s current “best practices”

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How does the system operate currently?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On-site observation – make arrangements through mailroom supervisor Darrell Johnson 2. Interview with supervisor of mailroom, Darrell Johnson 3. Interviews/shadowing of mail clerks, arrange through Darrell Johnson 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schrute 2. Jim 3. Pam
Who are the key players or personnel in the current system?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interview with supervisor Darrell Johnson 2. Flowchart from current mail-sorting policy and procedure manual 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schrute 2. Pam will get from Angela
What problems exist in the current system?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interviews with mailroom supervisor, mailclerks, department secretaries 2. Survey all employees 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jim 2. Kelli
What individuals, units or departmental operations are negatively impacted by the existing problems?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employee survey 2. Interviews with departmental secretaries 3. Interview with department heads 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schrute 2. Pam 3. Jim
What individuals, units or departmental operation would be involved in making changes to the system?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interview mailroom supervisor Darrell Johnson 2. Interview departmental secretaries 3. Interview with department heads 	Jim will do all
What options exist for resolving the problems?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Separate focus groups for mailclerks, secretaries. 2. Collect suggestions from employee surveys, 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schrute 2. Kelli
How have other companies resolved	<p>Online/database research in the UNLV business databases; initial sources include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>First class classification [mailroom automation]</u>. By: Lees, Matt. Engineering & Technology 	Pam (all online research)

<p>similar problems?</p>	<p>(17509637), 2/23/2008, Vol. 3 Issue 3, p45-45, 1p, 1 diagram; DOI: 10.1049/et:20080310; (AN 32579663)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Processing "Unstructured" Forms</u>. By: Gingrande, Arthur. AIIM E-DOC, Nov/Dec2003, Vol. 17 Issue 6, p28-37, 3p; (AN 11457015) • <u>MAXIMUM MAILROOM</u>. By: Rosenberg, Jim. Editor & Publisher, 6/9/2003, Vol. 136 Issue 23, p24, 1p, 1 color; (AN 10023972) • <u>Cox Ohio Publishing rolls into next century with automated cart loading</u>. By: Rosenberg, Jim. Editor & Publisher, 06/12/99, Vol. 132 Issue 24, p38, 4p, 1 diagram, 2 color; (AN 2004128) • <u>Mailroom automation is today's necessity</u>. Managing Office Technology, Aug96, Vol. 41 Issue 8, p30, 2p, 2 bw; (AN 9611031013) <p>Best sources of information include the following journals and databases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing Office Technology • Engineering Technology • Lexis-Nexis 	
<p>What are the industry's current "best practices"</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Telephone survey with mailroom managers at comparable local companies: Vance Refrigeration, Stuckey's, Pig-and-Pickle 2. Online research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USPS Best Practices for Mail Center Security http://www.usps.com/communications/news/security/bestpractices.htm • GSA Best Practices Award Winners http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentId=17016&contentType=GSA_BASIC&noc=T • MMS Mailroom http://metroms.net/MailroomServices.htm 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kelli 2. Pam