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# A Clear, Succinct Research Question Portends the Rest of the Story

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Publication in peer-reviewed journals is a key mechanism to advancing what we know as it promotes scholarly conversations about important topics in one's field of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Vital to this conversation is having a clear, succinct research or study question as it provides the storyline — the thread — that logically connects all the sections of a manuscript.

## The Question

The introduction of your manuscript sets the stage for the question. This section identifies the problem, relays what is already known based on a review of the literature, and highlights the gap between the problem and what is known. It intentionally lays the groundwork for the manuscript and is framed to draw the reader's interest in the question. Beyond the author's interest in the question, the question must be one that is important, intriguing, and consequential to the field. If the question is answered, it will fill an essential void and provide a new starting place for conversations to advance the field. When the question is set, it is the keystone that supports and connects the methods, results, and discussion into a powerful storyline.

A weak research or study question and its effects on the remainder of the paper are among the most common editorial reasons for rejection. Editors/publishers often note in their rejection letters that “the research topic isn't of great enough significance,”<sup>2</sup> that there was the “lack of a clear and testable research question,”<sup>3</sup> that the topic was not “compelling,”<sup>4</sup> or that it was “difficult to follow the logic.”<sup>5</sup> More specifically, they will note that “the question behind the research may be unclear, poorly formulated, or not relevant to the research field.”<sup>3</sup>

Writing a strong, clear, and succinct research or study question is challenging, as evidenced by the more than 20 different published frameworks and strategies currently available.<sup>6</sup> Among these frameworks and strategies, one of the most common is the *FINER* approach,<sup>7</sup> which highlights five questions to answer to determine the quality of your research or study question (Figure 1).<sup>7-10</sup> Once the *FINER* criteria are fulfilled, the introduction to the paper typically concludes with the question, providing the story a premise that each remaining manuscript section serves to support.

## Seek Guidance Early!

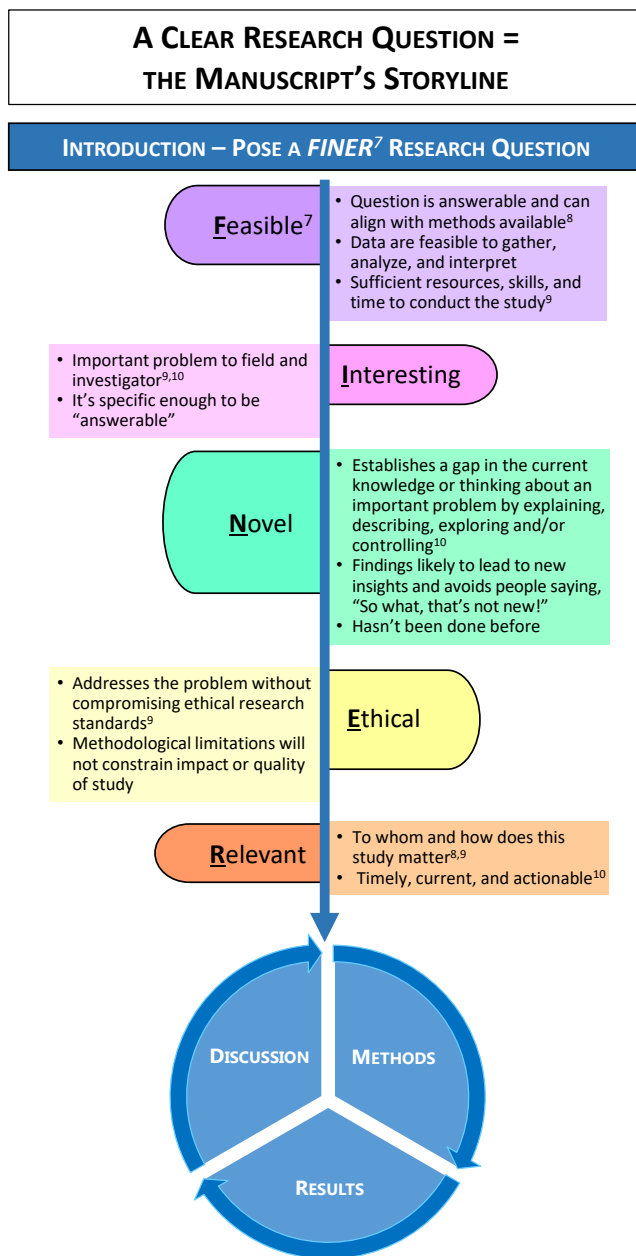
Research or study questions are derived from a number of sources including one's own personal experiences. Once generated, it is imperative to carry out an extensive literature review to help address the *FINER* questions in order to refine your research or study question, and further inform the methods of your study protocol for answering the question. Consult with a librarian whenever possible as their expertise in both the traditional and gray literature saves you time and yields a more thorough, systematic search strategy (a key element of your introduction in both your study protocol and manuscript).

- **Common Reason for Manuscript Rejection:** Lack of up-to-date references or heavy reliance on self-citation.<sup>5</sup>

One key point in the *FINER* model is methodological feasibility. Study methods must align with the research or study question. Data must be feasible to gather and able to be analyzed within the existing time available for completing the study, and within fiscal constraints. Further resource constraints should also be taken into consideration when contemplating the studies feasibility such as: Are contracting resources needed for this study and are they available? Does the study require data extraction support and/or statistician support? Is that support available/affordable? How extensive is the chart review? If prospective, how long will enrollment take? Et cetera. Find a colleague, mentor, or research consultant with methodological and statistical proficiency when developing the methods of your study protocol. A strong, clear research or study question and review of

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**Figure 1.** How a feasible, interesting, novel, ethical, and relevant (*FINER*) research question informs a manuscript's framework.

the literature will enable them to provide insights and methodological alternatives not previously considered, along with needed sample sizes. One of these individuals may be able to review the methodological (and results) section of your protocol for your institutional review board application and/or the manuscript to enhance its alignment with your research or study question. Journal peer reviewers carefully examine the methodologies outlined in your manuscript to be sure that the methods measure what they purport to do.<sup>3</sup>

- **Common Reason for Manuscript Rejection:** Inappropriate or outdated methodology.<sup>5</sup>

When the study has been completed and you begin writing the results section, start with major findings first and then report on any subanalyses. Explicitly connect the results to the research or study question to assure continuity of the storyline from introduction to methods and then to discussion and conclusion. Avoid presenting interpretation or implications of the findings in the results section, as that belongs in the discussion section. The discussion section may also include additional questions generated by your question, limitations you've considered/encountered in your efforts to answer your question, and further considerations to help advance the field.

- **Common Reason for Manuscript Rejection:** Inaccurate conclusions on assumptions that are not supported by your data. Conclusions must be justified within the rest of the manuscript.<sup>2,5</sup>

### Summary

A research or study question that is feasible, interesting, novel, ethical, and relevant (*FINER*) provides the guidepost for all design and reporting decisions.<sup>7</sup> A manuscript is merely the story of your systematic inquiry into an important question in the field. Start the conversation for your study early, with knowledgeable colleagues, by developing a study protocol aimed at answering your research or study question. This should be completed before proceeding with any study, as the manuscript is merely a continuation of this conversation outside of your study protocol in an enduring, peer-reviewed form.

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