

# **Suggestions for Designing a Dissertation or Other Research Project with the Aim of Helping Advance Progressive Social Change**

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1. **Ask significant, important, meaningful questions** whose answers can make a difference in the world and in the lives of large numbers of people outside academia.
2. If you can't **explain the significance of your research question to non-academics** or explain why your research question is important, something is wrong. Find another research question.
3. **Remember: People are dying.** When designing your research and developing a research question, linguistic anthropologist William Leap recommends, remember that you have the privilege of conducting research in a world in which people are dying and suffering unnecessarily.
4. **Don't get your research questions from other academics.** There are exceptions, of course, but generally speaking, the best research questions tend not to come from fellow academics. They come instead from the people with whom you want to conduct research or from major public questions, problems, dilemmas, and concerns of the day, which can be found in newspapers, online debates, conversations on the street, social media, and media more broadly. Compare these questions to those academics have asked about similar topics as you hone your research question.
5. **Link your work to a social movement.** This advice from late anthropologist Leith Mullings *doesn't mean* study a social movement. It means that the best research questions often come from and serve a social movement.
6. **Identify research questions with the help of the people with whom you want to conduct research.** Echoing Mullings, this advice comes from anthropologist Roger Sanjek. It applies especially if you want to conduct research with or about a specific group of people, and you want your research to benefit them. Figure out what questions are interesting and important to them. What questions they're asking. What questions they think need answering. But remember...
7. **Studying a group of people is often not the best way to help them.** Too often research is irrelevant to the lives of people one might want to help (often because research asks questions irrelevant to people's lives). When scholarship focuses on the poor and the marginalized, anthropologist Laura Nader warns, research findings can be used against them by others. A better approach might be to...
8. **Study the powerful.** Studying the powerful people, institutions, and forces shaping the lives of billions remains as urgent as it was when Laura Nader called on scholars to "study up" in 1969. Studying—and often exposing—the workings of the powerful can be a better way to assist any group you might want to help (including groups as large as wage laborers, those affected by

global warming, and those potentially affected by nuclear war). Contrary to #4, this requires a critical perspective on the group with which you will conduct research—e.g., powerful corporate actors, politicians, the military, the media, others. However, this doesn't mean turning the powerful into cartoonish villains or polemical punching bags. Such portrayals rarely help anyone.

**9. Ask an empirical (not a theoretical) question.** There are important empirical questions that need answering, documentary work that needs documenting. If you ask a good empirical question, it will have theoretical significance, and your empirical answers will help build theory. Too much of academia has fetishized theory, often leading to research with limited or no political significance. Beware research driven by theory alone.

**10. Don't be sloppy! Maintain the highest standards of scholarly rigor.** Scholarship that may feel good politically and seem to advance your political aims, but that's based on sloppy research usually backfires: you will offer weak, easily discredited conclusions that can actually harm your political goals and any people you might want to help. One helpful exercise is to imagine how a political opponent might critique every scholarly choice (e.g., in your research design, methods, analysis, writing, etc.); if you can't reasonably defend a choice against an accusation of political bias, re-think it.<sup>1</sup>

**11. Ask a question focused on solutions.** Much scholarship focuses on diagnosing problems. People interested in advancing progressive social change need more research asking questions about and providing solutions to problems.

**12. Think strategically** about how your research and its anticipated research findings will contribute to progressive social change. Which means that it's critical to...

**13. Have a theory of social change** and the role of scholarship in creating change.

**14. Develop a dissemination and impact strategy.** Rather than hoping or assuming your work will have impact or that the world will surely find your work because of its sheer brilliance, make sure you have a plan to ensure impact. Don't wait. Do this during the research design phase. Go beyond a writing plan alone to think about how you can make your research findings useful to affected populations, social movements, policymakers, journalists, and many others. Think about dissemination across as many forms of media as possible (e.g., video, websites, public events, podcasts, Twitter, TikTok, other social media, and more).

**15. Research can have multiple goals, outcomes, and audiences:** empirical, activist, advocacy, public, academic, theoretical (h/t Sanjek). Don't forget that research doesn't have to be either/or.

**16. Have confidence in your work** if you're asking questions that are important and significant to large numbers of people beyond academia. If anyone tells you your work isn't part of your discipline, isn't *real* [insert your discipline here], remember Dell Hymes's advice (1969) about such disciplinary boundary marking: "One should react to the utterance of 'That's not [insert your discipline here]'" as one would to the omen of an intellectual death. For that is what it is."

### **General Advice for Designing Research Questions**

1. **Have *one*.** Having a clear central research question is critical to good research and good scholarship. Some research projects can have 2-3 central research questions, and most large works of scholarship have subsidiary questions, but add questions with great care. An unfocused list of questions generally results in unfocused research.
2. **Ask simple questions.** Ask simple questions. Ask simple questions. Simple research questions are usually the strongest and most important. In most cases, this means asking questions that anyone can understand.
3. **Ask a question to which you genuinely do not know the answer.** Ask a question you are genuinely curious about. What do you want to know and understand? Asking a question that you think you know the answer to already will lead to poor research and scholarship.
4. **Ask a question someone else hasn't answered.** Unless you think an answer is wrong, why should anyone care about research that's asking a question that's been answered satisfactorily? Replicating prior studies has its (small) place but think carefully about what questions need to be answered most urgently.
5. **Ask an answerable question.** Ask a question that you can reasonably answer given the time and resources you have.
6. **Workshop your research question with others.** Share the question with a wide range of people outside and inside of academia and ask for their feedback. While you don't have to and won't be able to follow all the feedback, consider all feedback seriously.
7. **Avoid the "kitchen sink" problem** of throwing too many concepts, methods, and theories into a research proposal because you think the proposal will be stronger or more appealing to reviewers. The opposite is usually the case, just as it is when a proposal asks too many questions.

### **Three-ish Questions to Ask Yourself Repeatedly during Research and Writing**

1. **Who benefits?** Who (other than you) will benefit from your research and scholarship?
2. **How will your work be useful to others?** Which others/who?
3. **How are you working to ensure your work is useful** and helps improve the world (rather than just hoping it will be so)? What specifically are you doing to ensure your work has impact? What's your dissemination and impact strategy?

## **Research Question Examples**

*Note: Some of these questions are better than others. Some surely have been answered to varying degrees. Consider these questions cautiously as per the advice, “Don’t get your research questions from other academics.” Research questions are best developed in close collaboration with people impacted by proposed research as well as with multiple trusted advisers, student colleagues, and a variety of non-academics.*

How has the far right organized itself in seemingly effective ways cross-nationally?

How can the left better organize itself cross-nationally?

What impact has the Military Industrial Congressional Complex had on democracy in the United States since World War II?

What are the mechanisms by which the Military Industrial Congressional Complex shapes U.S. foreign and domestic policy?

How have “Don’t say gay” and “Don’t say race or slavery” laws impacted classroom instruction and student learning both in states with such laws and in states without such laws?

What is the relationship between college fraternities and sexual assault?

What is the relationship between university administrations and the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses?

What are the health effects of carrying high amounts of debt? Student debt?

How and to what extent have weapons manufacturers shaped U.S. government policy on Ukraine?

Who has benefitted from the war in Ukraine and how have they benefitted?

What are the broad effects on Afghans of the U.S. government’s decision to withhold billions of dollars in Afghan government money from the Taliban government?

What are the likely human, financial, environmental, and other impacts of a war between the United States and China, under various war scenarios? Between the US/NATO and Russia?

How should the U.S. government best calculate reparations due to the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries where the U.S. military has waged war? What are the calculations for each war?

What is the total value of GI Bill benefits denied to or taken from Black veterans? What consequential harms have resulted from this denial/taking in qualitative and quantitative terms?

What are the effects on refugees/migrants of being held in ICE detention centers? Of living for long periods of time in Mexico along the Mexico-U.S. border?

What are the health effects of pursuing a Ph.D. in the social sciences and humanities? An M.A.?

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Leacock (1987) explains, “Scientific rigor—conscientious attention to detail, careful consideration of the unexpected or seemingly contradictory, deliberate weighing of alternative explanations for behavior, and so forth—is not by itself a matter of politics. People on all sides of political fences can be either careful or sloppy in collecting and organizing data, and either intently thoughtful or casually superficial in drawing conclusions from them.”