



Research Questions

Design, Evaluation, and Refinement

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Annenberg School for Communication

Today's workshop

- Planning a project
 - + Considerations and constraints
 - + Audience and evidence
- Testing potential questions
 - + Preliminary questions
 - + Framing/reframing an inquiry
- Evaluating research questions
 - + Working backwards: imagining SAFE thesis statements
- Solving problems
 - + Problems > questions > answers > solutions
 - + Statements of purpose

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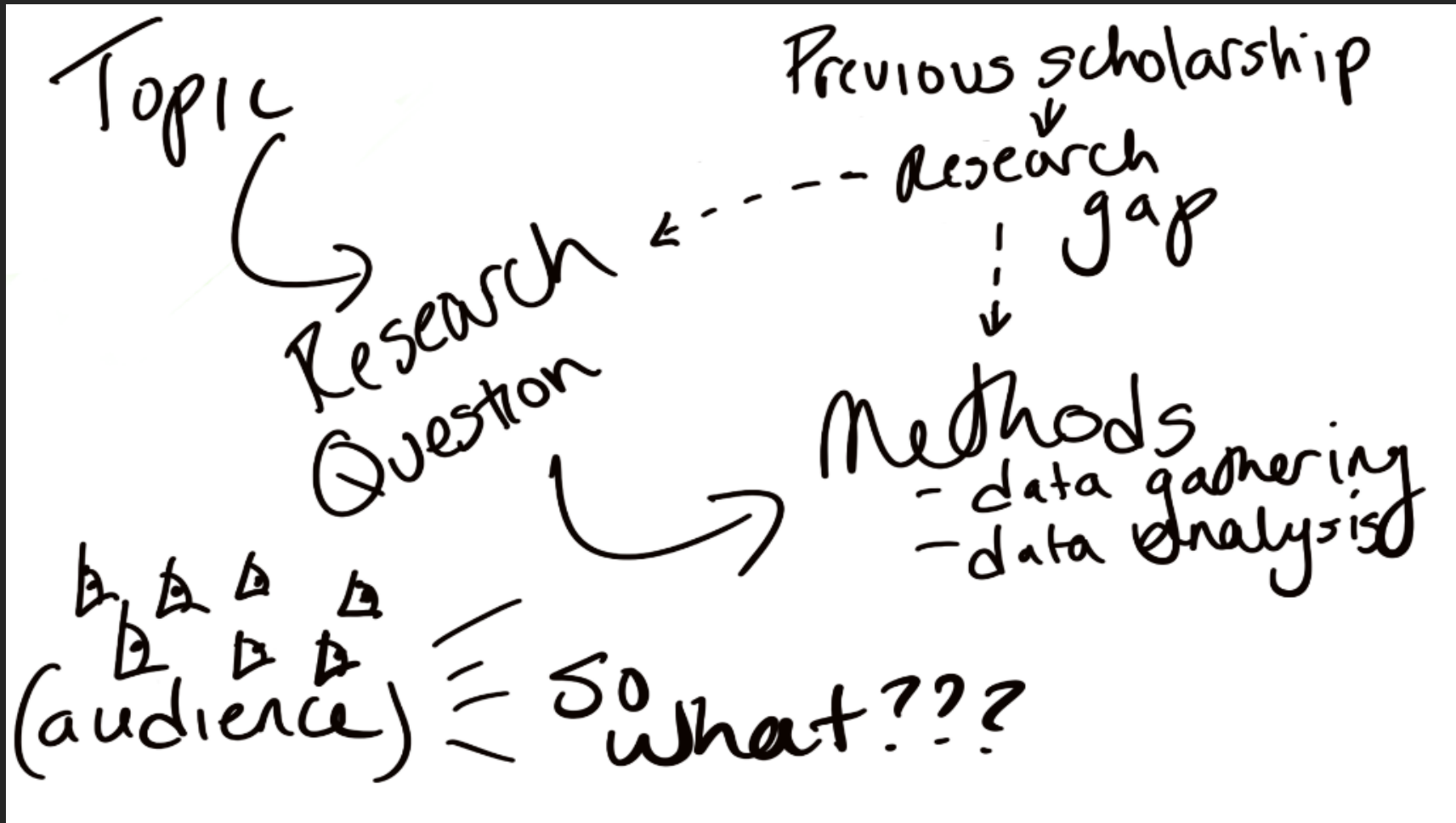
APRIL 8, 2022 BY TROY
Developing Research Questions

Developing a research question, like every other aspect of a research project—working with sources, the interpretation of data, the writing, the editing—takes work, and is a skill that you can practice, refine, and personalize. Here's a short primer on how to come up with a workable research question, references included.

Whether you're just beginning, or already have a research question in mind, consider starting at the beginning of the worksheet and jotting down answers to each section. I've also included a completed worksheet as an example to follow if you are finding it hard to get started.

[Click here to download a copy of the Developing Research Questions Worksheet](#)

Connecting everything



Trajectory of a research question

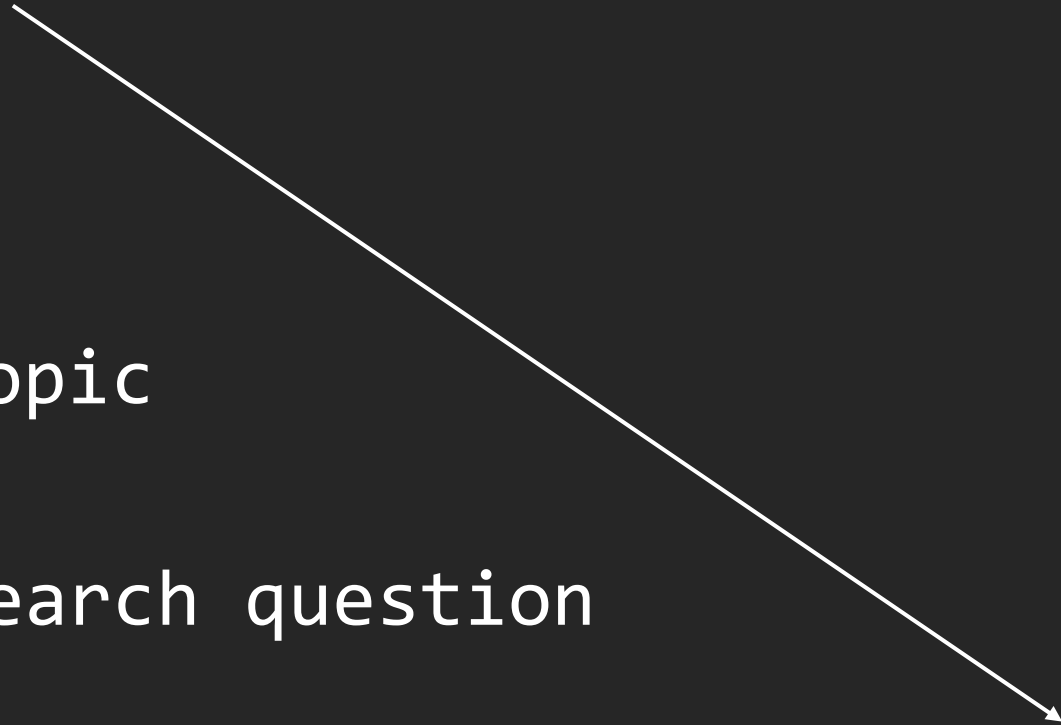
Interest

General topic

Focused topic

Research question

Significance/justification



Trajectory of a research question

Interest

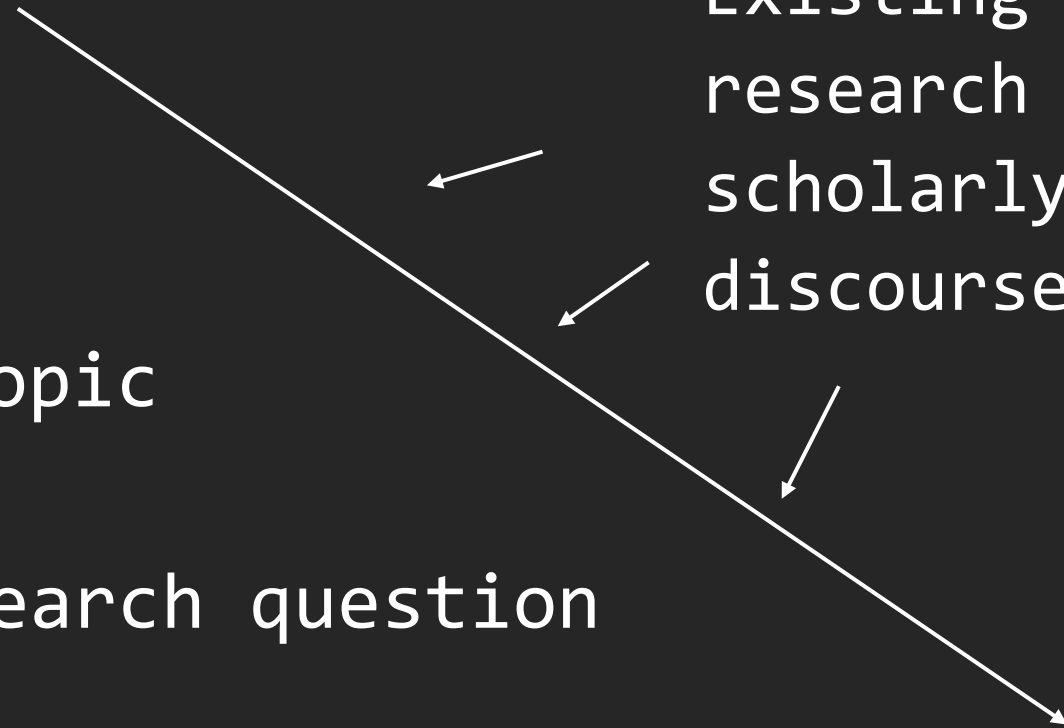
General topic

Focused topic

Research question

Significance/justification

Existing
research and
scholarly
discourse



Planning a project

1. When thinking about a topic to choose, consider:
 - + The time constraints of the assignment
 - + The scope of the assignment
 - + The expected/typical contribution for your field

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. 2008. *The Craft of Research*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Planning a project

1. Assignment constraints

2. Develop a question by considering the broader context of the topic

- + What is up for grabs? What existing conversations or scholarly gaps exist?
- + Who is speaking? What are the major arguments?
- + What is the “real world” significance of your inquiry?

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Planning a project

1. Assignment constraints
2. Contextualize questions
3. Determine what types of evidence might be relevant to you as you work to answer these kinds of questions:
 - + Who is your audience?
 - + What kinds of primary source materials are available?
 - + What counts as data? (Operationalization)

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Planning a project

1. Assignment constraints
2. Contextualize questions
3. Consider evidence
4. Identify where/how you can find/access that data:
 - + Are there existing sources of data?
 - Databases
 - Archives
 - + Can you collect your own data? How?

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Narrowing: Testing potential questions

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- What is the history of your topic?
 - + Does your topic have an internal history to consider?
 - “Have official efforts to combat political misinformation changed over time? How have they been directed towards online misinformation, in particular?”
 - + Can you compare or contrast that history with other, related histories?
 - “During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health officials have had to combat a lot of misinformation. Is the kind of misinformation that they face substantially different than political disinformation? What is the relationship?”

Narrowing: Testing potential questions

- What is the history of your topic?
- What is the context of your topic?
 - + Is it part of a larger system worth considering?
 - “Do countries with different internet infrastructure face the same misinformation issues as the United States?”
 - + Can you imagine your topic as a system, made up of different parts?
 - “How do public educational efforts to combat ‘fake news’ at different government levels (federal/state/local) work together? Do they?”

Narrowing: Testing potential questions

- What is the history of your topic?
- What is the context of your topic?
- Can you categorize parts/aspects of your topic?
 - + How can you group your topic into types?
 - “The category of ‘fake news’ encompasses many different things. Should we consider issues of intentionally misleading news differently than issues of misunderstanding/misinterpretation or issues of political spin?”
 - + Can you compare and contrast any aspect of your topic?
 - “What differentiates ‘fake news’ from bombastic/muckraking opinion pieces?”

Narrowing: Testing potential questions

- What is the history of your topic?
- What is the context of your topic?
- Can you categorize parts/aspects of your topic?
- Change positive questions into negative questions.
 - + Can you ask “why not” instead of “why?”
 - “Is it inevitable that widespread disinformation would occur with the growth of social media or is it a symptom of something else?”

Narrowing: Testing potential questions

- What is the history of your topic?
- What is the context of your topic?
- Can you categorize parts/aspects of your topic?
- Change positive questions into negative questions.
- Use speculative questions.
 - + “What if X was/wasn’t the case?”
 - “How would the landscape of fake news on social media websites change if social media companies faced stronger government regulations?”

Narrowing: Testing potential questions

- What is the history of your topic?
- What is the context of your topic?
- Can you categorize parts/aspects of your topic?
- Change positive questions into negative questions.
- Use speculative questions.
- Does your topic have an extensive research history?
 - + What are the major strands of agreement/disagreement in your field?
 - Arant's (2020) survey of existing federal efforts to combat political misinformation suggested that they have been overwhelmingly effective. However, the way that study operationalized "success" considered only the immediate, short term effects of discrete pieces of misinformation and not the broader political climate. How have efforts to combat political misinformation attempted to address public mistrust in the long term?

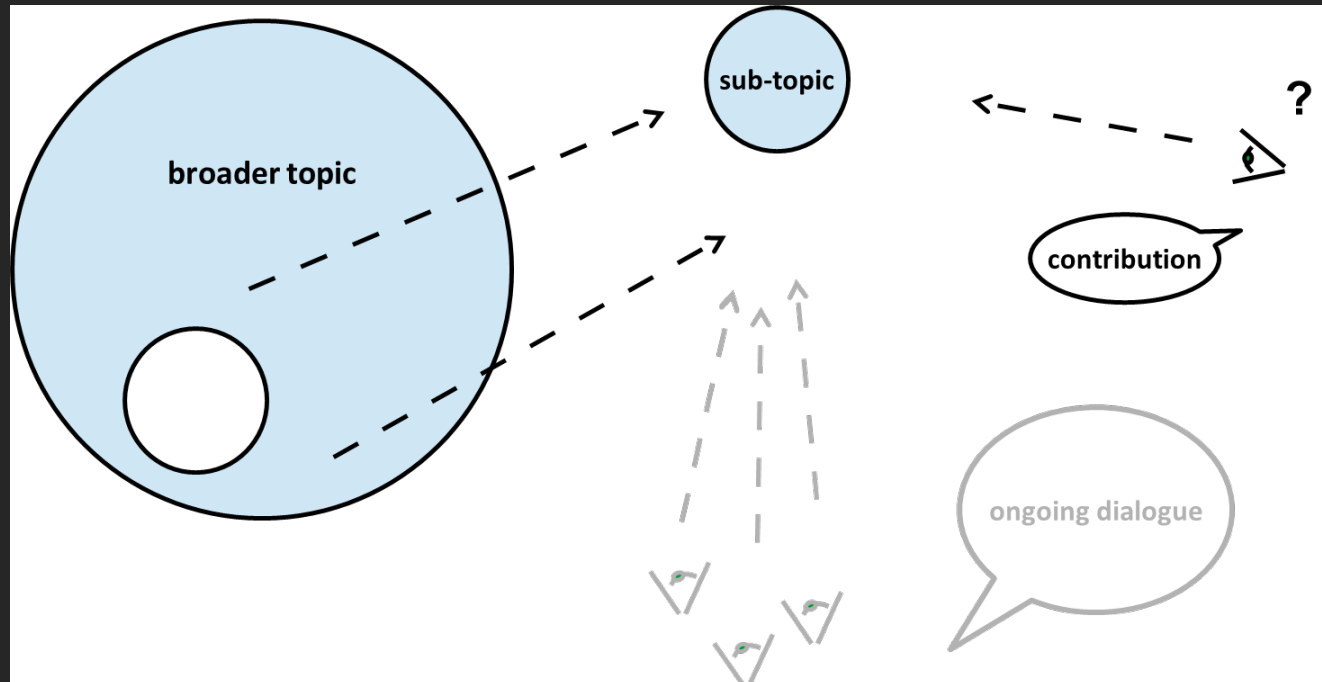
Contextualizing your work

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- What is the context of your work?
 - + Social Context (What real world situation/phenomenon does this work help us understand?)
 - + Academic Context (What has prior scholarship said about this question or related issues?
 - What is the research gap that you will fill with your scholarship?
 - What is the problem with this gap not being filled?

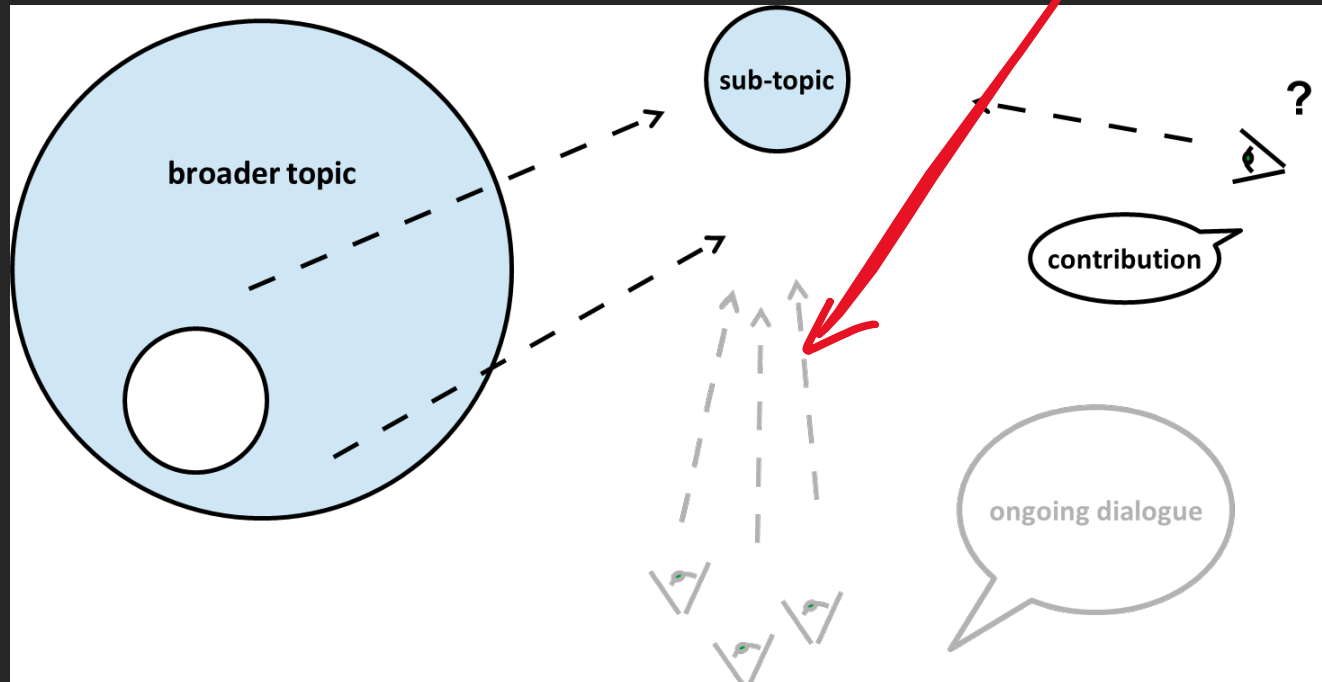
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Evaluating: Working backwards

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Research question -> Answer

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Research question -> Answer (thesis statement)

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SAFE thesis statements

Evaluating: Working backwards

Research question -> Answer (thesis statement)

SAFE thesis statements

Significant

Argumentative

Focused

Evidence-based

Evaluating: Working backwards

- Significant (Consequential)
 - + What would happen if this question was never asked or answered?
 - + What are the consequences (academic, social, practical, theoretical, etc.) of the different answers that you might get to the question you are asking?

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- Focused (Intentional about its scope)
 - + What other themes does your question touch on?
 - + What would be the consequences of narrowing/broadening your inquiry?
 - + Does your question pull on any strings that you aren't prepared to deal with?

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 - + Does your question pull on any strings that you aren't prepared to deal with?
- Evidence-based (Supported by data, explainable)
 - + What kinds of data do you need to answer this question? Sources?
 - + How will you interpret this data?

Solving problems

Solving problems

Practical problem

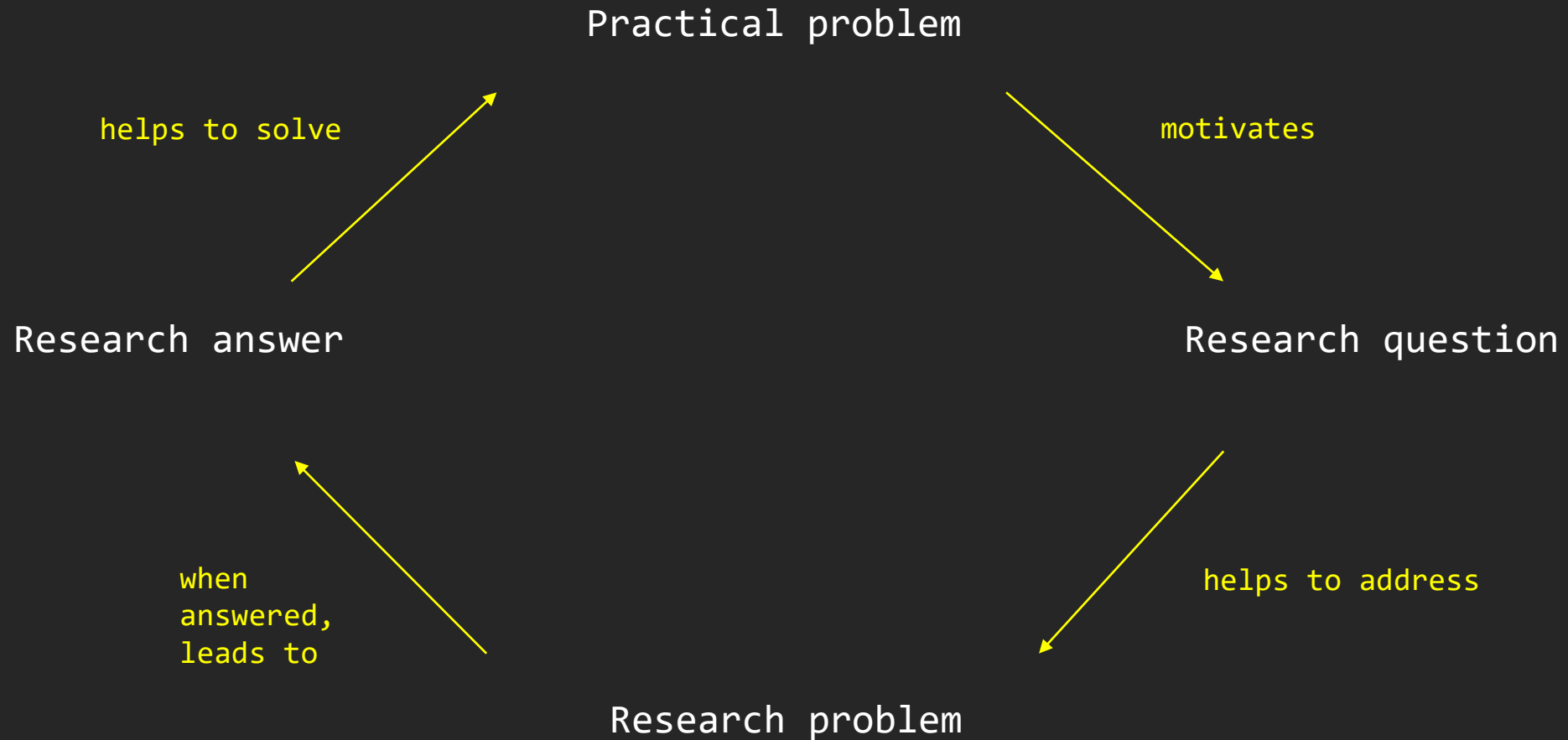
Research answer

Research question

Research problem

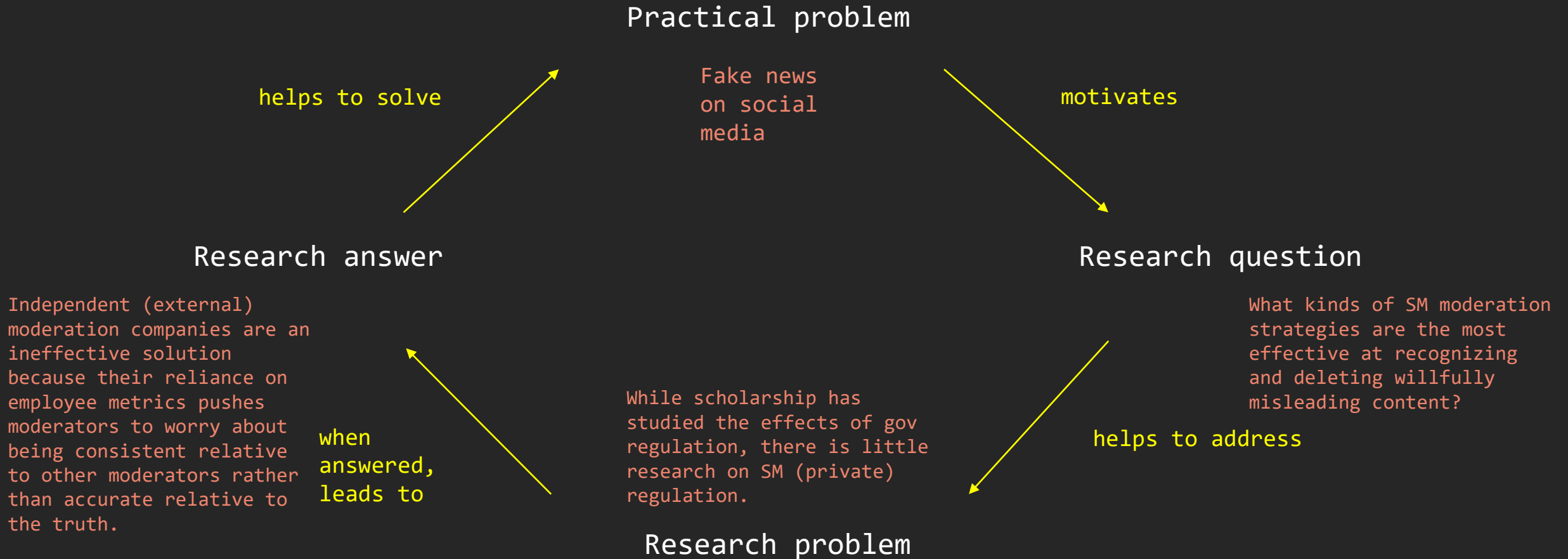
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Solving problems



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Solving problems: Statements of purpose

- Purpose Statement
 - + Establish the intent of the study/research
 - + Describes design
 - Relevant theoretical frameworks?
 - Methodology

Adapted from Creswell, John W. 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.

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“The purpose of this _____ [strategy of inquiry, such as ethnography, case study, or other type] study is [was? will be?] to _____ [understand? explore? develop? discover?] the _____ [central phenomenon being studied] for _____ [research site, situational context]. At this stage in the research, the _____ [central phenomenon being studied] will generally be defined as [provide general definition and justification for that definition if possible].”

Solving problems: Statements of purpose

Model “The purpose of this _____ [strategy of inquiry, such as ethnography, case study, or other type] study is [was? will be?] to _____ [understand? explore? develop? discover?] the _____ [central phenomenon being studied] for _____ [research site, situational context]. At this stage in the research, the _____ [central phenomenon being studied] will generally be defined as [provide general definition and justification for that definition if possible].”

Example “The article contributes to the literature addressing the needs of gay and bisexual students by identifying several areas where progress can be made in improving the campus climate for them. This paper derives from a two year ethnographic study of a student subculture composed of gay and bisexual males at a large research university; the focus on men reflects the fact that lesbian and bisexual women constitute a separate student subculture at the university under study”

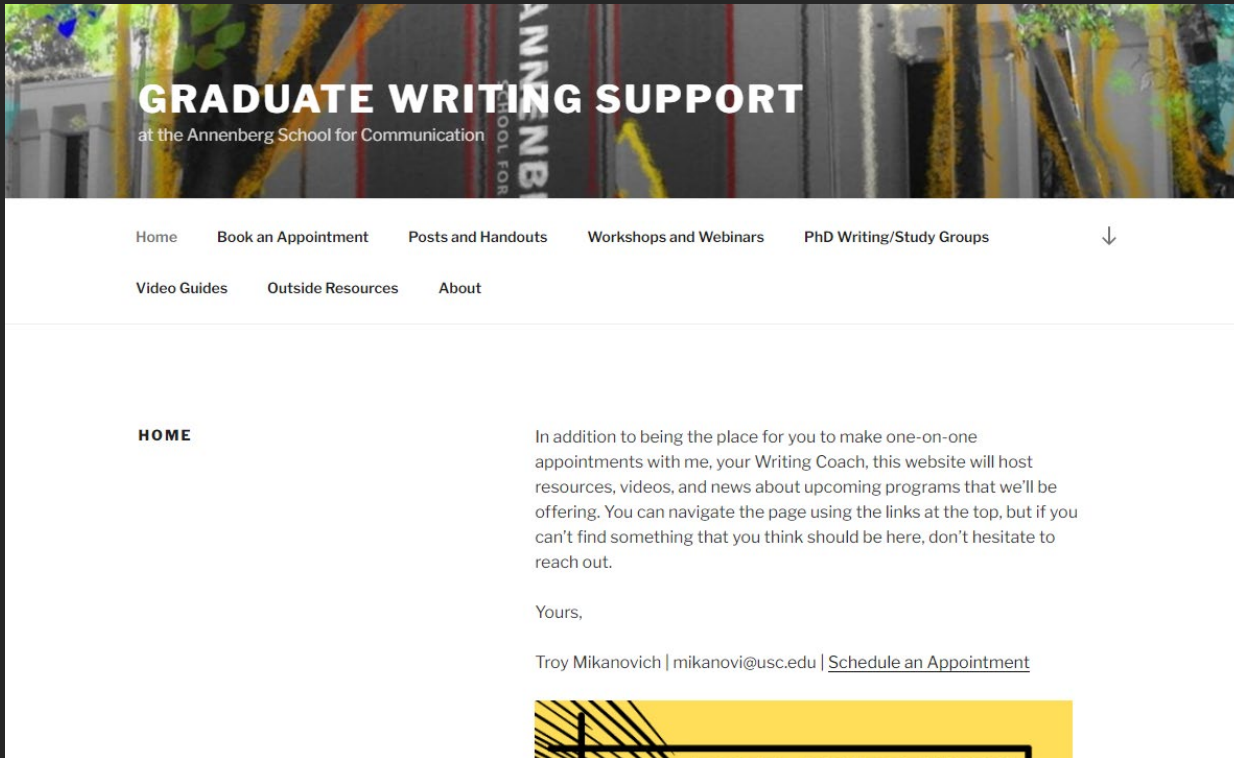
Rhoads, R. A. 1997. “Implications of the Growing visibility of gay and Bisexual Male Students on Campus.” NASPA Journal, 34(4), 275-286. Quoted in Cresswell (2014, p.127).

References/Resources

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More summer webinars



The poster is titled "POST-COURSEWORK SUMMER WEBINARS WITH THE ASC GRADUATE WRITING COACH". It lists four webinars:

- 6/16 2:00pm** Organizing Your Qualls Reading List and Brainstorming Questions
- 6/23 2:00pm** Outlining Your Prospectus
- 6/28 11:00am** Developing Research Questions
- 7/7 4:00pm** Literature Reviews and Creating a Research Space

At the bottom, it says "REGISTER | MIKANOVI@USC.EDU".

