

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
Department of Geography

GEOG 4210/5210
Urban Geography
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Research Question Thoughts

Every report written for this class has to have a clear purpose. It is sad that I should have to mention this, but the truth is that many reports and essays written at the university level suffer from a lack of focus that makes the reader wonder why the report was created in the first place. You need to avoid this problem, because *your* reader (me) will not put up with reading an aimless accounting of facts and views that somehow relate to urban issues of some indeterminate kind.

To avoid this problem, you need to make sure that your report includes a purpose statement that we will call a “research question”. The research question is the central problem that you will answer in your report. You must spend some substantial time thinking about your research question so your report has the clear purpose it needs to be successful.

The following are some important things to consider as you formulate your research question:

1. The report for this class is meant to be written as a consultant’s report that would be presented to a client. Possible clients include a local community or government (like the City of Denton), or perhaps an organization representing a group of businesses in a place (like the Dallas Chamber of Commerce). This means that you should write your report in a way that would be relevant to the “client” you have chosen. Focusing on a specific research question will help make your report relevant to your client’s situation.
2. In a typical client-consultant situation, you (the consultant) would usually receive instructions, information, and insights from your client right at the start (i.e. a description the problem to be solved, a discussion of what they care about that creates a concern of some kind). The information you receive from such a discussion is very important in researching and writing a report that is useful for your client. However, in this class you will likely need to be just a little more creative because you may not have an actual “client” to talk to. This is OK. If you don’t have a client to help you develop a direction, you need to give serious thought to what your client might say if you could actually talk to them. *What is meaningful to them? What kind of information do they use (or could they use) that would be helpful to them in doing their job better? What contribution could a geographic perspective make to their situation?* Of course, developing this kind of understanding means that you need to do some basic, background research to help you understand your client and predict would they might tell you if you could talk with them.

3. I hope #2 makes it clear that actually talking to “the client” would be wonderful if it is actually possible to do so. Do you know someone in the business, industry, or group that you want to target for your report? For example, if you’re writing a report focusing on transportation issues in Dallas-Fort Worth, it would be great if you could actually talk to someone working with the region’s transportation planning team and ask them the kind of questions posed in #2. Having an intelligent conversation¹ with a person who works for your target community/business group/government can be really helpful in steering your work in a good, interesting, and relevant direction. This being said, sometimes this is just not possible, and fine papers can result without contact with an industry “insider”. Just make sure you jump on the chance to make such a contact if you can.
4. While it would be great if you could come up with a single, well-thought-out question that focuses all of your efforts, it is possible you will find that you need to deal with two or three related questions to address your client’s concerns. It is fine for you to address a short series of questions in your paper, but you still need to make those questions focused.
5. Related to #4, it is important to realize that there are different kinds of research questions. I’ll outline two question type possibilities here.
 - a. One common kind of research question is an exploratory question. Here’s a couple of examples of exploratory questions, fully stated:

This paper investigates the factors that made Grapevine’s Main Street revitalization efforts successful in terms of history preservation and business promotion. To answer this question, the paper will focus on the characteristics of the city and the approach the city took in its revitalization process.

This paper profiles the location choices of “The Original Pancake House” in Dallas-Fort Worth to determine whether the chain has placed restaurants in all local markets that fit the restaurant’s stated market requirements.

This kind of question provides a profile of a situation. This profile research is driven by a specific, applied purpose (not just a general fact-finding exercise with no real point). The researcher formulates such a profile or general analysis of a situation to be of use to real-world decision-makers (not just a nice-looking report to put on a shelf).

¹ Meaning a conversation you have prepared for, involving background research on the business and a list of questions that you think are most helpful in gaining the information you need from the person you are interviewing.

- b. Another kind of question is process-driven, investigating the potential existence of a specific condition or phenomenon that relates to an issue from class:

The objective of this case study is to determine whether residents of more affluent neighborhoods have better access to supermarkets over residents of poorer neighborhoods.

This paper investigate whether urban sprawl in Houston has been accompanied by greater income inequality in Houston's neighborhoods.

These questions begin with some kind of supposition (that wealthy residents have better access to groceries than poor residents, or that urban sprawl is related to the rise of more extremely wealthy and extremely poor neighborhoods) and initiate a targeted research process to determine whether the supposition has any validity.

So both exploratory/profile and process-driven questions are possible in this course. You should consider both for your project:

- Do you want to investigate the general characteristics of a city or urban situation, and relate the profile information to some specific problem of interest to you? Then an exploratory/profile-type investigation might be best.
- Do you have a rational reason to suppose that something might be true about a particular city of interest? Then a process-driven investigation might be good for you.

You might use either kind of research question, or even combine them by using both kinds: lay out an exploratory question that provides a profile of a situation, and then define a process-driven question that investigates some specific aspect of what actually goes on in the situation. There are many possibilities for research questions, and I encourage you to give your question(s) a lot of thought before deciding on a definite direction.