Choosing a Research Question

All research starts with a question. Research is carried out in order to provide an answer to that question. However, research is not as simple as thinking of a question and then going off and collecting some data.

Every research question has:

1. **A theoretical context.** All research is ultimately aimed at testing, confirming, disproving or extending a theory. Consequently, your research question must be rooted in a psychological theory of some sort.

For example "Does eating jam sandwiches improve performance on a test of perceptual-motor skill?" is a poor research question, because there is absolutely no theoretical reason to believe that it does. On the other hand, "Does sleep deprivation affect performance on a test of perceptual-motor skill?" is a valid research question, because the restoration theory of sleep suggests that there should be an effect of some sort.

2. **A background of empirical research.** Whatever your question is, there will be some psychological research that has been done that relates to it in some way. Previous research studies will guide your methodology and give an indication of what results you can expect to find.

This does not mean that you must restrict yourself to repeating research that has already been carried out. Although it is **perfectly acceptable** for an A –Level student to perform a limited replication of published research, many research projects aim for a slight variation on previous research. For example, Smith & Jones found that performance on a reaction time task was affected by four hours of sleep deprivation, but they used a complex test of reaction time. Would the same results be obtained using a simple test?

3. **A rationale.** There has to be a valid reason for carrying out the research study.

This can be as simple as checking previous results for reliability, or it might be that there was a methodological problem in some previous research that needs to be put right, or perhaps the research literature does not cover precisely the area or question being asked.

4. **An appropriate methodology.** Depending on the question, there is an appropriate way of collecting data to answer it.

This depends wholly on the nature of the question, but **must** be considered from the start. For example, if you want to know about patterns of social interaction between men and women in conversation, a lab experiment is unlikely to be appropriate. On the other hand, if you want to know whether memory performance is affected by intermittent noise, a naturalistic observation is probably not the research method for you.

You need to come up with a research question that has all of these elements.