Developing your research questions

A research question is not the same as a topic. A good research question seldom springs into being at the beginning of a dissertation-writing process fully formed. More often, writers work on their RQs over time, refining them as they progress through their reading and research.

A good research question is clearly stated, has reasonable scope and definable terms, and it should not contain any hidden assumptions. It should be feasible within the time and resource constraints you have, and should sustain your interest over several months.

Scope
If you already have one or more RQs in mind, consider the levels of information within it. If your research question can generate a lot of sub-questions, it might be too broad. On the other hand, if you can answer your question with a simple yes or no, it might be too narrow. For example, the RQ ...

What impact has deregulation had on the airline industry?

... might be difficult to answer because the scope is very broad. Deregulation could have all sorts of impacts on the airline industry, in terms of safety, profits, marketing, etc. Thus, the scope of the research is potentially huge and should be further narrowed down to make it manageable. Similarly, the RQ ...

What percentage of UK household waste was recycled in 2013?

... might be too narrow in scope, since it would not require much in-depth research to find the answer and does not take much intellectual debate to clarify.

Defining terms
Some research questions can only be answered if certain terms used in them are clearly defined or operationalized. For example, the RQ ...

Does McDonald’s or Burger King make a better burger?

... is not answerable unless we define what we mean by “better”. Better according to whom? Better in terms of value, taste, nutrition, appearance or some other criteria?

Feasibility
In order for a research question to be answerable, the researcher must understand what information is required to answer it, and must be able to access this information. For example, the RQ ...

What is Danone’s future marketing strategy?

... is unlikely to make a feasible research project because Danone are unlikely to be willing to make their future marketing plans available to a student researcher without very strict restrictions. Aside from this, the question does not require much insight or analysis and could
be answered simply by regurgitating the company’s marketing plan with little reference to intellectual debate.

**Interestingness**
Try to choose a research question that you genuinely want to know the answer to, and that involves more than just regurgitating what you read in the library. For example, the RQ …

*What are the current views on quantitative easing in Europe?*

… is not especially interesting and can be easily answered by a bit of reading of what has already been published. It does not engage the researcher or the reader in much intellectual work.

**Hidden assumptions**
Be careful that your research questions do not contain within them unwarranted assumptions that would require investigation on their own. For example, the RQ …

*What can be done to stop ocean PH levels from changing?*

… assumes that PH levels in the ocean are indeed changing, which itself would require evidence and discussion. Secondly, the question assumes that changing ocean PH levels are something we *should* try to stop, but how do we know this is the case? These assumptions cannot be taken for granted. Similarly, the RQ …

*Why do multi-national teams tend to be less effective than single-nationality teams?*

… makes the assumption that multi-national teams are less effective than single-nationality teams, which may not be the case. And in any case, what type of teams are we referring to? This research question suffers from hidden assumptions and ill-defined terms.
Task
Below are some research questions. Based on the criteria above, and your own views about the characteristics of a good research question, decide which of the RQs qualify as:

a.) Too broad in scope
b.) Too narrow in scope
c.) Questions that would require more definition of key terms before they could be investigated
d.) Not feasible to investigate in 3-6 months (or at all)
e.) Questions that contain hidden assumptions
f.) Questions that are clearly stated research questions

1. Which is better, Japanese or European management style?

2. What are the effects of global warming on crop-production?

3. How do thirty executive MBA programmes compare over the period 2000-2010?

4. What can be done to reduce juvenile delinquency?

5. Why should companies provide 6 months of paid paternity leave?

6. Why have Aldi been successful in the UK?

7. Is there a competitive advantage to getting involved in corporate philanthropy?

8. To what extent are changes in recruitment processes in the UK related to Linkedin?

9. Are there generational differences in terms of responses to organizational change?

10. Are students who have completed a placement year likely to gain graduate employment?