Consideration and refinement of a research question

IDENTIFY an area of interest by thinking about:
- your learning and activities at school (subjects, courses, extra-curricular activities)
- your learning and activities outside school (hobbies, part-time job, interests)
- future plans (further study, work directions, ambitions)
- something you have always wanted to explore.

CONSIDER a research question that:
- is ‘new’ learning — a well-designed question gives you the opportunity to learn something new
- is personally challenging and manageable within the time frame
- has the potential to lead to some ‘key findings’.

REFINE your research question to:
- clearly express what your research is about
- provide a focus to guide your investigation
- allow you to use appropriate research processes (valid, ethical, manageable).

REFINING PROCESS — EXAMPLE

Draft 1: Why is there a mystery about the ship the Mary Celeste?
- Leads you towards a description of the mystery
- However, it lacks focus on the ‘truth’, i.e. the best possible theory for the mystery.

Draft 2: What are the theories regarding the disappearance of the crew of the Mary Celeste?
- Narrows question to focus on theories
- However, it only requires you to outline each theory
- Can be further refined to invite an analytical, rather than a descriptive, approach.

Refined research question: To what extent is mutiny the most likely cause of the abandonment of the ship the Mary Celeste?
- Allows you to show your thinking about the theories
- Asking ‘to what extent’, requires a considered judgment about the mutiny theory in the context of other theories
- Enables demonstration of higher-order thinking skills, depth of knowledge and understanding of the theories.

Question types to avoid
- Questions that lead to descriptive and narrative answers, such as those with a ‘What’ starter, e.g. ‘What is a sand storm?’, and those that are self-evident, e.g. ‘How to become a _____’ or ‘What are the different types of ____?’
- Questions that are too broad, e.g. ‘What is space?’, which lead to brief coverage of many areas
- Questions that invite responses that confirm students’ prior knowledge of a topic rather than demonstrate their learning.

Use an open-ended question
Closed question: ‘Is obesity going to cost Australia?’
- Invites a simplistic yes/no response
- Limits the research.

Open-ended question: ‘What are the social costs of the increase of obesity to Australia?’
- Invites an insightful response
- Allows extensive research, e.g. investigation of financial, employment, educational, social activity, and medical costs
- Allows a variety of research methodologies to be used.

Some useful question stems include:
- How useful …?
- How valuable …?
- How accurate …?
- How important …?
- To what extent …?
- How reliable …?

REFINED QUESTION — EXPLAINED

How accurately does the Baz Luhrmann film The Great Gatsby represent the clothing fashions of the 1920s?
How accurately does the Baz Luhrmann film The Great Gatsby (invites an argument that can be researched and does not promote description) represent the clothing fashions (clear purpose, refined and narrow enough to be manageable) of the 1920s? (specific focus — parameters of place and/or time defined)