Four tests for your RQ

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How to Write Your Extended Essay (Getting Started)

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Getting started with your Extended Essay can seem like a pretty big challenge. The best advice I can give you is to start early and choose your research question carefully. Starting early is a time-management aspect you’ll have to figure out on your own. But I can help you a lot on the second part.

Coming up with an appropriate question is about 25% of the whole battle. Your supervisor can help you with this a little bit, but often they’ll leave it to you.

And you’ll want to be very careful here. With the right question almost anything is possible. With the wrong question, you’re setting yourself up to fail. Most students brainstorm possible ideas, ask for suggestions and read successful EE samples (which are often available in your high school library). But I want to help you to do better than the average student. The following 4 tests will help you make sure your RQ is top notch.

The four tests
A good research question (RQ) passes the following 4 tests:

1: Is it the right scope?

Of course the question needs to be one that is answerable within the 4000 word limit. You should be asking one relatively simple question. 4000 words seems like a lot right now, but (after a few months of research and writing) it won’t. Try to make your question as focused (small) as possible. A question like, “Has the Singapore government’s approach to health care improved economic growth” is WAY too broad. That’s crazy talk. Why? Because the government has a lot of approaches to health care (thousands of them for all we know) and it’s would be pretty hard to show a causal link between any of these strategies and economic growth. A question like, “Is Singapore’s grocery store industry an oligopoly?” is much better. It’s not too broad; however, that one’s also probably too obvious. Singapore only has 2 or 3 grocery store chains, so you can pretty much answer this question on the first page. You need something that fits between these two extremes. In Singapore, it’s much less clear (to me anyway) whether the movie theatre industry is an oligopoly, so you could ask, “What market structure would best characterise Singapore’s movie theatre industry.”

2: Can you see which course concepts you’ll use?

Are you able to identify several course concepts (analytical models) that you can use to analyse your question? In Business you’ll need 4 or 5 of these. In Economics you’ll need one main one and then one or two smaller ones to touch on. Obviously, if you can’t tackle the question using ideas from the course than it’s not appropriate. As I explain here, your mission is to show off how much you understand the ideas taught in class. A common mistake (which happens slightly more in Business EE’s) is to research every possible aspect of a business (maybe because your dad works there) and then expect that sharing that information will impress the marker so much that you’ll get a 7. Every year there’s a student who does this (normally without realising it). They think that knowing as much about the company as an insider does is enough. It is not. We just want to see that you understand course concepts and can use those to prove or disprove a thesis using course concepts.

3: Will you have the information?

Will you actually have access to the secondary information you’ll need to answer your question and will you actually be able to do the primary research required? This is a tricky one, which you won’t always be able to answer right away. However you do need to answer it really soon. If your RQ fails test 3 you won’t be able to use it. Try to think about the concepts you’ll be using (Test 2). For the economics example above (the theatre...
one), you might want to determine whether there is price competition, so you’d want to compare prices over time (from different theatres, in different locations, at different times, etc). That information won’t be easy to get. **Test 3 is about access. EE research normally requires that someone on the inside trusts you.** For a business student, if you’re doing to do a SWOT analysis and some kind of investment appraisal, what data will you need to fill in those tools? Consider, what information you would need to answer those questions. Data that you expect is probably available (i.e. online) often isn’t. So you’ll have to do your homework here. And the earlier the better. If you’re going to be relying on someone (i.e. that your uncle turn over a copy of his company’s balance sheet) get what you need from them as soon as possible. **If they don’t give you the numbers or the interview that you need within a month, it’s probably time to change your RQ.**

This stuff isn’t personal, people are busy, information is sometimes confidential. Get as much of your data as you can in the first month and show this to your supervisor. Every year there are students who don’t problems related to lack of information until there are only a few months left and that’s too late.

**4: Will this topic help you?**

Ideally the research you do here will help you get into your preferred university program. If you’re applying to an Econ program at university next year, than it would be great to have a letter from your Econ teacher explaining what a great job you did on your recent Econ EE. Or, perhaps you aren’t sure if you want to pursue Business in university or not, the EE might be a great opportunity to experience what university study is like. Or maybe you’re simply genuinely interested in the research question. The point here is that it’s great if you have some other kind of motivation other than just finishing the EE. That will help you do better work and get ahead of the pack.

You should ask yourself whether you feel your question has passed each of these tests. Take your time and be sure. It’s okay to ask other people if they think your question passes these tests as well. And of course you can ask your teacher or your supervisor (as soon as you’ve been assigned one) if they think the RQ passes these tests.

**When you meet with your supervisor**

By the time you meet with your supervisor for your first real meeting you would ideally have chosen a question that you think passes the 4 Tests. And you will ideally have started to organize yourself:

Your supervisor will be interested to hear about (and see evidence of):

- Your research findings so far. Hopefully you’ve found a number of secondary sources, beyond just your text book. (Magazine and newspaper articles, annual reports from the internet, etc) and you have an idea of your primary research plans.

- And also try to be ready to explain what you think you will be able to show in your essay. You should be ready to explain how your question relates to course concepts. Forward planning. Begin to chart-out your timeline of the coming months, your to-do list.