

## The Research Process:

### STAGE 1: Formulating a research question

- 1) Research begins with a question, e.g., “What is a scientific explanation?” “What makes one scientific explanation better than another?” “Does science’s preference for simpler theories lead it closer to the truth?” “Are there any universal, objective moral facts?” “What is Kant’s understanding of causation?”
- 2) All research questions should be:
  - a. Interesting: in other words, there needs to be a genuine problem that needs to be solved. Two reliable ways to motivate interesting problems are to either:
    - i. Show that there is a *conflict* between two things that seem *intuitive*; or alternatively,
      1. Clearly articulate a conflict by showing the contradiction or unattractive trade-offs between two intuitive claims; *and/or*
    - ii. Set up a *foil*, typically in the form of a respected philosophical position or notable philosopher to whom you object to.
      1. Clearly identify your objections to the author with tight argumentation, by showing that the author’s position has intuitively false, undesirable, etc. consequences.
        - i. Thus you should demonstrate how these consequences follow (logically) from a direct quotation of the author, making sure that you have interpreted that quotation as charitably as possible. Try to show that something satisfies the author’s position but is completely counterintuitive or that something completely intuitive fails to satisfy the author’s position.
  - b. Tractable: It’s important that you raise a question that you can make some inroads to answering. Otherwise, there’s every reason to think that you have bitten off more than you can chew.
    - i. In this case, a well-defined problem really is a problem half-solved. One of the largest difficulties young researchers face is not having a clear understanding of the conflict or foil they’re grappling with, and the result is several poor solutions to several interesting problems rather than one solid solution to one interesting problem.
      1. A really good way of avoiding this pitfall is to find an exemplary essay that asks the same question you’re asking, but provides an answer you completely disagree with. (This is a great way of setting up a foil). Be as precise as possible in identifying where you think the author has gone wrong.
    - ii. Flag these objections and problems with special names, e.g., the Gettier Problem, Voltaire’s objection, Hungerford’s objection, the underdetermination of theory by data, the liar paradox, the redundancy objection, etc.

1. Wherever possible, use the names of objections employed by notable philosophers; this helps people understand your problem, and also allows you to revisit the exact contours of the problem as spelled out by a really smart person.
- iii. Have an *inkling* of a solution by the time you've precisely stated your question. While open-mindedness and curiosity are laudable intellectual virtues, they lose much of their value if they are not tempered by thinking directed at the solution of a problem. Your inkling may be wrong, but you'll only discover that in an intellectually robust way by committing yourself to that inkling and exploring the consequences of that commitment. Typically, what results from such exploration is a new and improved inkling that is chastened by the defects of the old inkling.