# **What is Research?**

## **Basic definition**

Research is nothing more complicated than ‘finding out’ about a particular topic of interest. Most people are ‘natural researchers’ as they track down relevant information.

In Higher Education, ‘research’ has come to be associated with finding out ‘new knowledge’ - pushing the frontiers of understanding. At undergraduate level this means simply a fresh understanding of the topic.

You carry out research every time you prepare an essay or assignment. However, you might well also have to complete a longer dissertation, often in the final year before graduation. The purpose of this is threefold: to help you consolidate your learning; to give you a chance to use your academic skills to explore a topic of your choosing; and to prepare the ground for later postgraduate work by getting you to extend your existing research skills.

## **Formal definition**

Research is a systematic process of discovery and inquiry. It involves finding, documenting, analysing and evaluating critical information as well as collating, analysing and evaluating data. Research is carried out to:

* To increase knowledge
* To contribute to new knowledge
* To evaluate bodies of knowledge, viewpoints, the validity of a hypothesis or theories.
* To generate questions for further inquiries.
* To evaluate and develop practices.

## **Where do you begin?**

The answer to this question very much depends on what stage of the higher education journey you are at. In the early stages, Foundation – Stage 2, you will most likely be given an essay question to respond to. It is essential that you breakdown the question into its component parts before beginning your research to ensure you understand completely what you are being asked to write about. If you do not do this, your research will likely be too broad and ‘off-point’.

SAS have a study guide on **Understanding Essay Questions**. This guide will help you to analyse the question and provide you with a focus for your research. You will then need to brainstorm ideas, theories, concepts that you might already know about the topic and consider which ones are most relevant to the question. Next, start identifying key reading material by surveying book/journal titles and scanning information such as contents pages, introductions, journal abstracts, indexes.

A great way to expand your research is to look at bibliographies at the end of books or articles to find the sources the authors have used; then seek out these sources yourself. Visit the online [library resource guide](https://www.kent.ac.uk/library-it/your-subject-library-resource-guide) for subject guidance and tips.

There is more about this in our study guide on **Essay Writing**.

## **Undergraduate dissertations and postgraduate research**

In your final year of undergraduate research, you will probably embark on your first dissertation. Apart from the significant difference in word count, a dissertation differs from an essay in that you will need to come up with your own research question. Two initial questions are paramount:

* What is going to be the central focus of the study?
* What is the best method for gathering the information needed?

You will likely need to conduct a literature review and you will already have developed some skills in this area from researching to write essays. However, you might also need to carry out empirical research which could be quantitative or qualitative in nature.

For guidance on the research process in relation to undergraduate study, please see our study guide on **Undergraduate Dissertations**.

If you choose to continue your studies after you have completed your undergraduate degree, you will most likely need to consider whether to complete a ‘Taught Master’s’ or a ‘Master’s by Research’. By now, you will have some research experience, having completed your UG dissertation. However, what if your choice of PG degree is not entirely cognate (i.e. related in subject to your UG degree)? You could be facing different research conventions; at the very least, you are stepping up the academic ladder, so good preparation is essential to ensure your success.

For guidance on postgraduate research, please see our study guide on **Undertaking Postgraduate Research**.

## **Using research**

For one to one advice on how to use research for specific assignments and to speak to one of our advisers, either book an [**appointment**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/student-learning-advisory-service/appointments)orattend a [**workshop**](https://www.kent.ac.uk/student-learning-advisory-service/on-campus-workshops)**.**

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