Define Your Research Question & Select Framework

Overview

A well-defined research question is the foundation of a systematic literature review. Every subsequent decision (which databases to search, what terms to use, which studies to include) flows directly from it. A question that is too broad produces an unmanageable volume of results; one that is too narrow may yield almost nothing. Structured question frameworks give you a reliable method for making your question precise and searchable before you open a single database.

Why Are You Conducting This Review?

Before formulating your question, be clear about the purpose of your review. A systematic literature review is not a default method; it is the right choice for specific research goals. Common justifications in business and management research include:

- Analyzing the progress of a specific research stream
- Making recommendations for future research directions
- Reviewing how a particular theoretical model has been applied in the literature

- Reviewing how a particular methodological approach has been used across studies
- Developing a conceptual model or framework
- Answering a specific, bounded empirical question

Your research question should follow directly from one of these purposes. If you cannot identify which of these your review serves, discuss the scope with your supervisor before proceeding.

Why Structure Your Question?

Formulating your question using a framework forces you to identify the exact components of your topic and translate them into search terms. This step is worth doing carefully in writing, not just in your head, because:

- It makes your search strategy transparent and reproducible
- It helps you spot gaps or ambiguities in your topic before investing time in searching
- It gives your supervisor something concrete to review and approve
- It is required as part of your protocol
- The components of your framework become the concepts in your Boolean search strings

---

Choosing a Framework

Different frameworks suit different types of research questions. The table below helps you select the right one.

Framework	Best suited to	Research types
PICO	Questions about the *effect* of something	Quantitative, experimental

Framework	Best suited to	Research types
SPIDER	Questions about *experiences, perceptions, or behaviors*	Qualitative, mixed-methods

Framework	Best suited to	Research types
PCC	Questions about *what exists* in a topic area (scoping)	Exploratory, mapping reviews

As a business or management student, you will most often use **SPIDER** or **PCC**, since many management questions ask "how" or "what" rather than "does X cause Y."

The PICO Framework

Stands for: Population · Intervention · Comparison · Outcome

Originally developed for clinical research, PICO is useful when your question tests whether a specific practice, policy, or programme produces a measurable result. It is less common in pure management research but relevant if your thesis touches on organisational interventions, training effectiveness, or behavioral economics.

Element	Question to ask yourself	Example

Population	Who or what is the focus?	SMEs in the EU retail sector
Intervention	What practice or factor is being examined?	Agile project management adoption

Comparison	What is it being compared to?	Traditional waterfall project management

Outcome	What result are you measuring?	Employee productivity and project delivery speed

Resulting question: *In EU retail SMEs (P), does adopting agile project management (I) compared to traditional methods (C) improve employee productivity and delivery speed (O)?*

The SPIDER Framework

Stands for: Sample · Phenomenon of Interest · Design · Evaluation · Research type

SPIDER was developed specifically for qualitative and mixed-methods research, where the concept of an "intervention" does not apply. It is well-suited to management questions about how people experience organisational phenomena such as leadership styles, workplace culture, or sustainability reporting.

Element	Question to ask yourself	Example

Sample	Who is the population being studied?	Mid-level managers in multinational corporations

Phenomenon of Interest	What experience, behavior, or issue is the focus?	Remote work and perceived organisational belonging

Influencing factors	What contextual factors are relevant?	Post-pandemic hybrid work policies

Design	What study designs will you include?	Interviews, surveys, case studies

Evaluation	What outcome or concept is being assessed?	Employee engagement, retention intention

Research type	Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed?	Qualitative or mixed-methods

Resulting question: *How do mid-level managers in multinationals (S) experience organisational belonging in remote/hybrid work environments (P), as shaped by post-pandemic policies (I), across qualitative and mixed-methods studies (D/R)?*

The PCC Framework

Stands for: Population · Concept · Context

PCC is used for **scoping reviews**, a type of SLR designed to map the existing literature on a topic rather than answer a narrow effectiveness question. It is appropriate when your research question is exploratory: you want to know what has been written about a subject, identify key themes, or find gaps before proposing a more targeted study.

Element	Question to ask yourself	Example
Population	Who or what is the subject of study?	Family-owned business

Element	Question to ask yourself	Example
Concept	What is the core idea or issue?	Succession planning practices

Element	Question to ask yourself	Example
Context	In what setting, geography, or timeframe?	European markets, 2010–2025

Resulting question: *What does the literature report about succession planning practices (C) in family-owned businesses (P) in European markets between 2010 and 2025 (C)?*

Practical Tips

- **Write your question down before searching.** Even one sentence written out forces clarity.
- **Test with your supervisor.** A good question should take no more than two sentences to explain to someone unfamiliar with the topic.
- **Iterate, but only once.** It is normal to refine your question slightly after initial scoping searches reveal how much literature exists. Finalise it before formal data collection begins and document any changes in your protocol.
- **Avoid "and" creep.** A question such as "What is the effect of leadership style on innovation and employee wellbeing and retention?" is three questions in one. Pick the most important element for your thesis argument.
- **Check for existing reviews first.** Before committing to your question, run a quick search in PROSPERO (crd.york.ac.uk/prospero) or Google Scholar to confirm a recent SLR on exactly your question does not already exist. Finding one is not a dead end; it means you can build on it, update it, or narrow your scope in response to it.
- **Keep your framework visible throughout.** Pin your completed framework table beside your workstation. Every element becomes a search concept in later steps; consistency between your question and your search string is one of the first things an examiner will check.

From Question to Search: A Preview

The components of your framework map directly onto the concepts in your Boolean search string. Each element becomes a concept block, and synonyms for each element become OR-connected terms within that block. The blocks are then connected with AND.

Using the PICO example above:

Framework element	Concept block
Population: EU retail SMEs	"SME*" OR "small firm*" OR "small business*" AND (Europe* OR "European Union")
Intervention: agile project management	"agile" OR "scrum" OR "kanban" OR "agile project management"

Framework element	Conceptblock
Outcome: productivity, delivery speed	`"employee productivity" OR "project delivery" OR "delivery speed"`

This mapping is covered in full in Conducting Your Search. The point here is that a well-structured question makes the search string nearly self-evident; a vague question makes it nearly impossible.

Revision #3
Created 24 February 2026 09:42:17 by Librarian
Updated 24 February 2026 12:22:27 by Librarian