THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION

IN BRIEF:

▪ A well-formulated research question is very important for the success of a scientific paper. So, what is a good research question?
▪ It's good if it is formulated as precisely as possible and if it is limited to a very concrete research problem.
▪ In the following text, we will give you an example of how you can proceed.
▪ Hint: At this point in particular, communication with the lecturer is very important.

The Importance of a good research question in formulating a topic

The following text is taken from the book "Schlüsselkompetenzen" by Frank/Haake/Lahm (see the source reference at the bottom of page 2):

▪ Let's say you are interested in the topic of Justice by Aristotle.

This topic can easily be rephrased into a question. It might be:

▪ What does Aristotle understand by justice?

However, if one formulates the question in such a general way, one would have to read all the writings in which Aristotle deals with the topic of justice in order to be able to give an extensive answer.

Therefore, it is important to limit the amount of material by formulating the topic more precisely. In our example, naming a specific reference text significantly limits the amount of Aristotle's texts that have to be read:

▪ What does Aristotle understand by justice in writing xy?

That is already a good step. Now it is clear which text one has to examine and that other texts by Aristotle do not necessarily have to be consulted.

However, the problem remains that one would probably come across a large number of very different approaches in the secondary literature that attempt to answer this question. With a closer reading, one would see that all attempts to answer the question of Aristotle's understanding of justice have something to do with the specific secondary author's understanding of justice at the specific time.
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Thus, despite limiting the amount of references, this question is still too imprecise. The amount of secondary literature to be read would still not be foreseeable, the amount of questions that would have to be clarified in order to be able to argue satisfactorily on all levels would still be disappointingly large.

To avoid this, you can first just review the secondary literature (skim and scan, not read through) and then make a conscious decision about which question, claim or theory about Aristotle’s remarks on justice from the secondary literature seems particularly interesting to you. This will also determine which aspect of the topic of justice you want to focus on. In the present example, you may come up with the ancient historian Moses Finley’s alienation at the way Aristotle talks about exchange justice. From here, you could further specify your question and thus your topic formulation.

This shows: By giving your research question a specific problem that is discussed in the secondary literature, you can further limit the amount of literature you need to read.

The intermediate result of the concretisation steps in our example could now be the following topic formulation:


This detailed topic formulation clearly limits what you need to do in the paper!

A final hint: Since the process that leads to a good research question requires some reading and research cycles, it is useful to allow enough time for this. The following handouts can also help you with this process (You can find them in the Toolpool in Chapter II: Structuring):

- "Narrowing" table
- Three-step
- Planning pentagon

References: