BA-Eindwerkstuk Seminar

Week 1: Developing a Research Question and Identifying the Research Problem

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February 6, 2026

Today's Agenda

1. Introductions
2. Boot camp overview
3. What is a research question?
4. Finding your problem in the literature
5. Thesis structure
6. Workshop: Research question development

Required Reading

Introduction and Part I of Mullaney & Rea, *Where Research Begins* (2022)

Introductions

Who's Who

About me:

- Assistant Professor, Korean Studies & International Relations
- Research: Korean studies, computational social science, comparative politics
- s.c.denney@hum.leidenuniv.nl

About you:

- Your name
- Your research interest (topic area)
- What do you hope to get from this seminar?

Boot Camp Overview

The First Four Weeks

The "boot camp" provides structured training before independent work with supervisors.

Week	Date	Topic
1	Feb. 06	Developing a Research Question
2	Feb. 13	Data and Sources (FAIR Principles)
3	Feb. 20	Conducting a Literature Review
4	Feb. 27	Analysis and Reporting

Key Deadline

Assignment #1 (Revised Proposal) due **March 13, 2026**

Today's Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

1. **Define** what makes a strong research question
2. **Distinguish** between a topic, a question, and a research problem
3. **Identify** research gaps in existing literature
4. **Outline** the basic structure of an academic thesis
5. **Draft** a preliminary research question and problem statement

What is a Research Question?

Topics Are Not Questions

A topic is:

- A subject area
- Broad and general
- A starting point

Example: "Korean nationalism"

A research question is:

- Specific and focused
- Open-ended (not yes/no)
- Answerable through research

Example: "How do South Korean history textbooks represent national identity in their coverage of the colonial period?"

Characteristics of Strong Research Questions

1. **Specific** — Clearly defined scope and boundaries
2. **Open-ended** — Cannot be answered with yes/no
3. **Researchable** — Can be investigated with available evidence
4. **Relevant** — Contributes to scholarly understanding
5. **Personal** — Connects to your genuine interests

Mullaney & Rea's Key Insight

"Your question is your compass. It will guide every decision you make." (p. 20)

What to Avoid

Problematic Question Types

- **Leading questions** — Assume the answer ("Why did X fail?")
- **Loaded questions** — Contain value judgments ("Why is K-pop so influential?")
- **Causal questions** — Often too ambitious for BA thesis ("How did X cause Y?")
- **Yes/no questions** — Too narrow ("Did the IMF crisis affect Korea?")
- **Jargon-heavy questions** — Unclear to non-specialists

Tip: Use exploratory language: "How," "In what ways," "What role does..."

Why Start with Yourself?

Self-Evidence (Mullaney & Rea)

The best research questions emerge from your own genuine curiosity and interests—not from trying to find a "gap" in the literature first.

Ask yourself:

- What puzzles you about Korea?
- What have you encountered that you want to understand better?
- What topics do you find yourself returning to?
- What makes you curious, confused, or even frustrated?

Your passion sustains you through the research process.

Examples: Good vs. Problematic Questions

Problematic	Better
"Why did North Korea develop nuclear weapons?" (causal, too broad)	"How do North Korean state media frame the country's nuclear program as a defensive necessity?"
"Is K-pop popular?" (yes/no, obvious)	"In what ways do K-pop fan communities in Europe construct Korean cultural identity?"
"Korean feminism" (topic, not question)	"How do South Korean feminist activists use social media to mobilize support for legislative reform?"
"Did the comfort women movement succeed?" (loaded, yes/no)	"What strategies have comfort women advocacy groups used to gain international recognition since 2010?"

Finding Your Problem

From Question to Problem

The Research Problem

A research problem identifies *what is missing*, *unclear*, *or contested* in our current understanding of a topic. It justifies *why* your research matters.

Types of research problems:

- **Empirical** — We lack evidence about X
- **Theoretical** — Existing frameworks don't explain X
- **Methodological** — Current approaches overlook X
- **Normative** — There is disagreement about how to interpret X

Identifying Gaps in the Literature

Common gap types:

- Understudied populations
- Unexplored time periods
- Missing perspectives
- Methodological limitations
- Theoretical blind spots

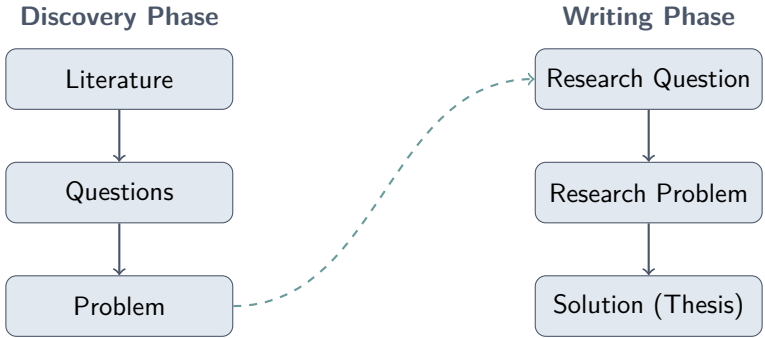
How to find gaps:

- Read recent literature reviews
- Look at "future research" sections
- Compare Korean and English scholarship
- Notice what's *not* being discussed
- Talk to your supervisor

Warning

Don't force a gap. If the literature already answers your question, adjust your question—don't pretend it doesn't.

The Research Process



Discovery: Reading generates questions, which reveal problems.
Writing: You present question first, then the problem it addresses, then your answer.

Thesis Structure

Overall Thesis Structure

1. **Introduction**
   - Research question and problem
   - Significance and contribution
   - Thesis outline
2. **Literature Review**
   - Existing scholarship
   - Identification of gap
3. **Theoretical/Analytical Framework**
   - Concepts and approach
4. **Methods and Data**
   - How you conduct your research
5. **Findings/Analysis**
   - Your evidence and interpretation
6. **Conclusion**
   - Summary, implications, limitations

The Introduction: Your Contract with the Reader

A strong introduction answers:

1. **WHAT** — What is your research question?
2. **WHY** — Why does this matter? (the problem/gap)
3. **HOW** — How will you answer it? (brief preview)
4. **WHAT NEXT** — What will the reader find in each chapter?

Tip

Write your introduction last (or revise it heavily at the end). You'll understand your argument much better after writing the whole thesis.

Workshop

Self-Reflection Exercise

Part 1: Brainstorming (10 minutes)

Working from your initial proposal or personal interests:

1. List 2–3 topics you're genuinely curious about
2. For each topic, write down:
   - Why does this interest me personally?
   - What specific aspect puzzles or intrigues me?
   - What do I want to understand better?

Reference

See Mullaney & Rea, pp. 27–28 and 31 for guided self-reflection prompts.

Drafting Questions

Part 2: Question Development (10 minutes)

Choose your most promising topic and draft 2–3 possible research questions.

Check each question against:

- Is it specific enough to research in 10,000 words?
- Is it open-ended (not yes/no)?
- Does it avoid causal, leading, or loaded language?
- Is it clear to someone outside your specialty?
- Does it connect to something you genuinely care about?

Stress-Test Your Questions

Part 3: Peer Discussion (10 minutes)

With a partner, share your best research question and discuss:

1. Is the question clear and specific?
2. What evidence would you need to answer it?
3. What might be the "problem" or "gap" it addresses?
4. Is there any problematic language (causal, leading, loaded)?
5. How could it be improved?

Be constructive! Help each other refine, not just critique.

Next Steps

Exercise: Draft Your Research Problem

Due before next class (not graded, but bring to Week 2):

Write approximately 500 words that:

1. **State the WHAT:**
   - Your topic area
   - Your research question (or 2–3 candidates)
2. **State the WHY:**
   - Why this matters to you personally
   - Why it might matter to others (scholars, society)
   - What gap or problem you think it addresses

This is exploratory—it's okay if you're uncertain. We'll refine throughout the boot camp.

Looking Ahead

Week 2: Data and Sources

- Primary vs. secondary sources
- Qualitative vs. quantitative data
- The FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable)
- Korean-language sources in your research

Key Dates:

- Assignment #1 due: March 13, 2026
- Start thinking about your supervisor and schedule a meeting

Course Website

`https://scdenney.github.io/baks_thesis-seminar/`