

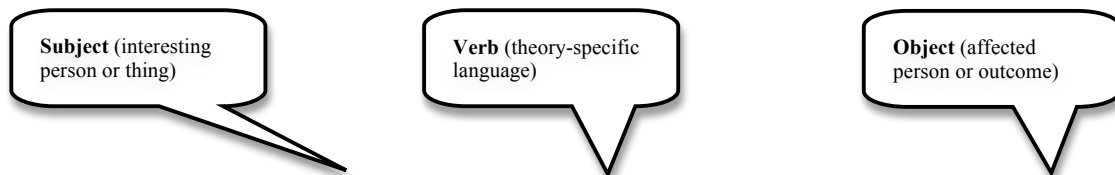
## Research Question and Hypothesis Worksheet

*Read this carefully:* This activity seeks to highlight key elements that should appear in a specific and manageable research question (RQ) or hypothesis. The cookie-cutter approach showcased here provides only a way to visualize some underlying grammar that orients most scholarly writing. I do not recommend this approach for any other purpose.

I should add that your initial RQ or hypothesis should always be seen as a first step. As you review scholarly literature, apply communication theory via method, and use that method to analyze data, your RQ or hypothesis may require refinement.

### Practice Crafting a Research Question

A research question is an open-ended prompt that typically orients a qualitative research project. An effective RQ often (but not always) starts with “How” and includes a subject, verb, and object [NOTE: “subject” in this case refers to the person or thing whose communication warrants scholarly analysis]. Consider the following example:



RQ1: How do **Lady Gaga's lyrics inspire a sense of identification** with her **fans**?

See? You’ve got a **subject** (including, in this case, an **artifact**: Lady Gaga’s lyrics), you’ve got a **verb** that reflects the theory guiding your analysis (“inspire a sense of *identification*” – using language from Kenneth Burke’s dramatism), and you’ve got an **object**, which allows you to assess the impact of this communication upon “her fans.”

*A note on artifact:* Sometimes it’s helpful (and relatively easy) to place the artifact in your RQ (eg., “lyrics”). Other times, though, doing so makes less sense – such as when you’re creating the artifact (eg., ethnographic notes or survey instrument).

**Now it’s your turn.** Create a research question by following these steps:

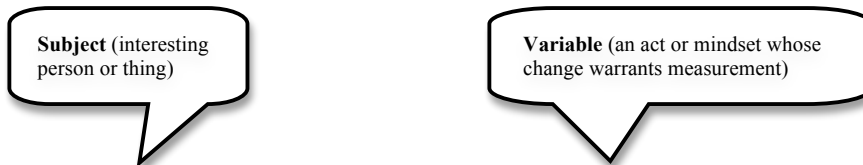
(1) Select a subject. (2) Select a verb. (3) Come up with an object that makes sense.

| Subject                      | Theory/Verb                                   |
|------------------------------|---|
| college students             | use <i>self-fulfilling prophecy</i> (chap. 5) |
| TV news producers            | <i>reframe</i> terms (chap. 14)               |
| Barack Obama                 | reduce <i>dissonance</i> (chap. 17)           |
| poker players                | employ <i>ethos</i> (chap. 22)                |
| children of divorced parents | use <i>totemizing rituals</i> (chap. 33)      |

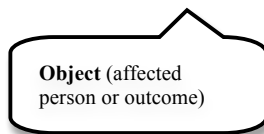
RQ1: How do(es) \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ ?  
(subject) (theory/verb) (create your own object)

## Practice Crafting a Hypothesis

A hypothesis is typically written as a claim (not a question), involving the manipulation of a **variable** in social scientific research. An effective hypothesis – in our department, at least – possesses three characteristics. First, a hypothesis should be *significant*. Testing the claim helps us learn something important and new. To illustrate, consider this example: “Diversity teaches us new things.” Is this claim important? Yes. But is it new? No. There’s little news here. Our example therefore fails to meet the standard of significance. Second, a hypothesis must be *communication-focused*. Once more, we see a problem. Our example could relate to psychology or spirituality or education; there’s no obvious communication link. Third, a hypothesis must be *theory-oriented*. Returning to our example, we find a verb, “teaches,” that fails to reflect specific language from communication theory. Once more, this hypothesis would not work. Thus, this exercise: Our goal is to write a clear hypothesis that meets the standards of significance, communication-focus, and theory-orientation. Toward that end, consider this example:



H1: **Children who watch more than eight hours of television a day** are more likely to **interpret the world as hostile** than those who watch less TV.



Note: The theory-orientation (“interpret the world as hostile”) draws from George Gerbner's cultivation theory (Chapter 26). Notice how this language resides in the object, not the verb. That’s OK, as long as the hypothesis includes theory-language *somewhere*.

**Now it’s your turn.** Create a hypothesis that uses “college students” as the subject and “are more likely to feel confident when interacting with professors” as the object. Propose a variable that uses one of Paul Watzlawick’s axioms (Chapter 14).

H1: College students who \_\_\_\_\_  
are more likely to feel confident when interacting with professors.

**Additional question:** What artifact do you propose for this study? \_\_\_\_\_  
[Hint: theory and method often influence choice of artifact.]

Remember, these activities are designed to help you start thinking about how to construct specific and interesting research questions and hypotheses. But don’t forget that these cookie-cutter exercises are only a first step. The *goal* is for you to understand and ultimately produce useful communication scholarship.