Methods for Studying Sustainable Foodscapes

FORMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGNING SES RESEARCH

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Food for Thought

WHAT IS A STRONG RESEARCH QUESTION?

A Strong Research Question

Clear and focused

- Clear and easy to understand
- Focused and specific
- Narrow enough to be answered meaningfully within the scope of the project

Researchable and feasible

- Researchable using appropriate evidence or data
- Manageable within the time, access, and resources available
- Specific enough to help guide the research design and methods

Meaningful and analytical

- Relevant to an important issue, problem, or area of inquiry
- Connected to the existing literature
- Able to lead to analysis, interpretation, or explanation rather than only description
- Open-ended rather than answerable with yes/no



Campus Farm Project

Research Questions

How can Bishop's Experimental Farm contribute to campus-community food sovereignty?

What can Bishop's learn from campus farms at other post-secondary institutions about strengthening the Experimental Farm's contribution to campus-community food sovereignty?

Campus-Farm Interview Guide

1. Could you briefly tell us about your campus farm?
- What are its main purposes?
- What is the approximate scale of the operation?
- What do you grow or produce?
- Who is involved in operating or governing it?
- What roles do education, research, food production, experimentation, or community engagement play?

2. How is the farm connected to your campus and surrounding community?
- Where does food or other farm produce go?
- Is the farm connected with campus food services, farmers' markets, CSA programs, student cafés or restaurants, food-access initiatives, donations, events, or other forms of distribution?
- What partnerships or arrangements support these connections?
- What has helped these relationships work?
- What barriers or challenges have you encountered?
- Are there connections you would like to establish but have not yet been able to?

3. Bishop's University is exploring how its Educational Farm can strengthen connections with its campus and surrounding communities. Based on your experience, what could Bishop's learn from your farm?
- Are there particular practices or relationships that have been especially important?
- What conditions have helped maintain these relationships?
- Is there anything you would approach differently if you were developing the farm again?

4. Is there anything important about your farm or its relationship with the campus or surrounding community that we have not asked about and that you would like to share?

World Café Questions

Question 1: Imagining Possibilities

- How can Bishop's Educational Farm strengthen connections with the campus and surrounding communities in ways that create conditions for campus-community food sovereignty? What could begin now, and what could develop within one year, three years, and five years? Who would need to be involved, and what roles could they play?

Question 2: Creating the Conditions

What would be needed to make these possibilities happen? What relationships, resources, infrastructure, knowledge, institutional support, or other conditions would be required? What barriers or challenges would need to be addressed?

Question 3: Participation and Moving Forward

How can students, faculty, staff, farm workers, and surrounding communities continue to participate in shaping the relationship between the Educational Farm, Bishop's, and surrounding communities? What opportunities for ongoing participation, collaboration, and decision-making could be created?

Examples of Weak Questions

Too broad:
How do campus farms affect society?

Too vague:
What is the impact of agroecology?

Yes/no question:
Are campus farms sustainable?

Not realistically researchable:
How can agroecology solve global food insecurity?

Mostly descriptive:
What activities take place at campus farms?

Too many things at once:
How do campus farms improve student learning, food security, biodiversity, mental health, community engagement, and local economies?

Contains an assumption:
Why are campus farms better than conventional university food systems?

Leading or value-laden:
Why should universities invest more money in campus farms?

Unclear population or context:
How do students benefit from farming?

Too narrow or trivial:
How many tomatoes were grown at the Bishop's Experimental Farm in August 2026?

Disconnected from a researchable problem:
What is the best campus farm?

Question is really a solution statement:
How can Bishop's use agroecology to create a sustainable and just food system for everyone?

Using Your Three Sources

What is your general research topic?

Looking across your three sources, what are the main ideas, themes, or issues that emerge?

- What do the sources have in common?
- Where do they differ?

What do these sources collectively help you understand about your topic?

- What seems to be already known?
- What important concepts, debates, or perspectives are beginning to emerge?

What do the sources leave unanswered?

- What seems uncertain, contested, overlooked, or in need of further investigation?

Based on what you have learned so far, what preliminary research question could you develop?

- Test your research question:
  - Is it clear?
  - Is it focused enough to study?
  - Is it researchable?
  - Does it require more than a yes/no answer?
  - Does it emerge from the literature you have reviewed?

What additional literature would you need to find to strengthen your literature review and refine your research question?

Purpose of Literature Review

Establish the topic, context, and scope

Explain what is already known about the topic

Organize literature around themes, concepts, debates, or perspectives

Compare and connect sources rather than summarize them one at a time

Identify patterns, agreements, disagreements, tensions, and different interpretations

Critically assess the contributions and limitations of existing knowledge

Identify what remains uncertain, contested, overlooked, or worth further investigation

Show how the literature leads to your research question

A literature review is not a collection of summaries. It develops a narrative about the existing knowledge on a topic.

Process for Creating a Literature Review

Begin with a topic or preliminary research question

Define the scope of what you want to investigate

Identify useful keywords, concepts, and related terms

Search academic databases and other appropriate sources

Read and evaluate sources for relevance and quality

Take notes on:

- arguments and findings
- concepts and theories
- methods and evidence
- patterns and themes
- agreements and disagreements
- limitations and unanswered questions

Group sources by ideas and themes, not by author

Compare and synthesize what the sources collectively tell you

Identify what warrants further investigation

Refine your research question

Search again as your understanding develops

Evaluating Sources

Authority – Who produced it? What expertise, experience, or knowledge do they bring?

Evidence – What evidence or knowledge supports the claims?

Methods – How was the knowledge produced?

Relevance – How directly does it relate to your research question?

Currency – Is it sufficiently current for the topic?

Purpose – Why was it produced, and for what audience?

Perspective – What perspectives or assumptions shape the source?

Limitations – What can the source tell you, and what can it not tell you?

Representation – Whose knowledge, experiences, or perspectives are included or missing?

Contribution – What does this source add to your understanding of the topic?

Quality of Sources

Strongest synthesis of research:

- Systematic reviews
- Meta-analyses

Other scholarly reviews:

- Narrative or literature review articles

Primary academic research:

- Peer-reviewed quantitative studies
- Peer-reviewed qualitative studies
- Mixed-methods studies
- Academic books and book chapters

Although some forms of evidence generally carry more scholarly weight than others, use the strongest and most appropriate evidence for the claim you are making.

Other important sources of evidence and knowledge:

- Government research, reports, and statistics
- Indigenous scholarship and publications
- Community-based and participatory research
- Reports from reputable organizations and institutions
- Policy documents
- Theses and dissertations

Useful only for particular purposes, but evaluate very carefully (usually considered weak sources):

- News articles
- General websites
- Advocacy publications
- Blogs and opinion pieces
- Commercial publications
- Social media

The Best Source Depends on the Question

A meta-analysis may provide strong evidence about whether an effect is consistent across many studies

A qualitative study may be better for understanding experiences, meanings, relationships, or decision-making

An Indigenous publication or knowledge source may be essential for understanding Indigenous knowledge, relationships to land, governance, or community priorities

A community organization may be the most appropriate source for understanding its own practices, experiences, and priorities

A government dataset may be the strongest source for official statistics

The strongest source is not always the same type of source. It depends on what you are trying to understand.

What You Will Need to Hand In

A literature review that leads to one or more research questions

800–1200 words

8 or more sources for an A

Use relevant, credible, and appropriate sources

Include in-text citations and a complete reference list using APA style

Hook / introduction

- Introduce the topic, context, and why it matters

Central focus

- Clearly establish the main issue, problem, or question guiding the literature review

Synthesis of the literature

- Organize sources around key themes, concepts, debates, patterns, or findings
- Compare and connect sources rather than summarize them one at a time

Different perspectives and limitations

- Address disagreements, tensions, counter-evidence, limitations, or alternative interpretations
- Consider what may be missing or underrepresented in the existing literature

Conclusion / outro hook

- Summarize what the literature collectively tells us
- Identify what remains uncertain, contested, overlooked, or worth further investigation
- Explain why further research is needed

Research question(s)

- Present (a) clear, focused, and researchable question(s) that emerges logically from the literature review

Reading Review

What is the main argument of the reading?
What problem, question, or challenge are the authors trying to help us understand?

What does the reading suggest about knowledge?
What forms of knowledge or ways of knowing are valued, questioned, marginalized, or overlooked?

What important tensions or relationships does the reading identify?
Consider relationships among people, institutions, ecological systems, food, land, knowledge, and power.

What does this reading suggest we should pay attention to when studying sustainable foodscapes?
How might it shape the questions we ask, the knowledge we consider, the relationships we examine, or the methods we use?

Reminder

We do not have class on October 5th or 12th.

I can make myself available to meet online on October 5th and 6th. Please email me to book a time if you want to meet. echevrie@ubishops.ca

The literature review and research questions assignment is due on October 9th before midnight, send via email to echevrie@ubishops.ca.

Thank You!

Questions, concerns, comments?