

Mismatch question and answers (example precision)

In writing courses students are asked to write down their research plan, starting with the main research question and the answer(s). Here is an example from a PhD student's template.

Research question:

What frames do stakeholders mobilize, and how do they affect the processes of social learning and negotiation in participatory management of forests and parks?

Answer 1:

The implementation of participatory management of a forest or park should take into account the frames of the stakeholders in that specific setting.

Answer 2:

Stakeholders have different frames as regards the issue, the process, the relationships, and the content, and those frames have an impact on the implementation of the process.

Does this plan satisfy the criterion that question and answer are closely related to each other? Let us analyse this example. To start with, notice that the research question is a two-part question containing a descriptive element (*What ...*) and an explanation (*and how they affect ...*).

Answer 1 should logically contain a description of mobilized frames and maybe an explanation of the characteristics of the processes used in that situation. This, however, is not the case. The student uses the word *should*; this word sounds like advice and makes this a design type question. This leads to an inconsistency in the connection between question and answer.

Answer 2 is rather problematic too. The word *different* signals the reader that this is a comparative question ('to what extent are the frames the same?'). The second part of the answer ('and those frames have an impact') does fit with the second part of the question because it is phrased as an explanation. However the content of question and answer are not properly related. The domain of the research question is the process of social learning and negotiation. The answer, on the contrary is about the issue, the process, the relationships, and the content. It is not clear whether these domains are the same or not.

Finally, the answer to the second question in the research question should be more precise. Since we prefer to interpret answers literally in this book, the question should have been, does it have an impact? The researcher however uses an open question to describe *how* they affect.

Perhaps this researcher wanted to mask his weaknesses by creating a mesh of words. However, it is more likely that he did not realise how messy his picture of the research was. Be aware of this risk, because if your basic structure is faulty this may lead to an endless process. Take a close and honest look at yourself and your plans, using the mirrors that this book offers.