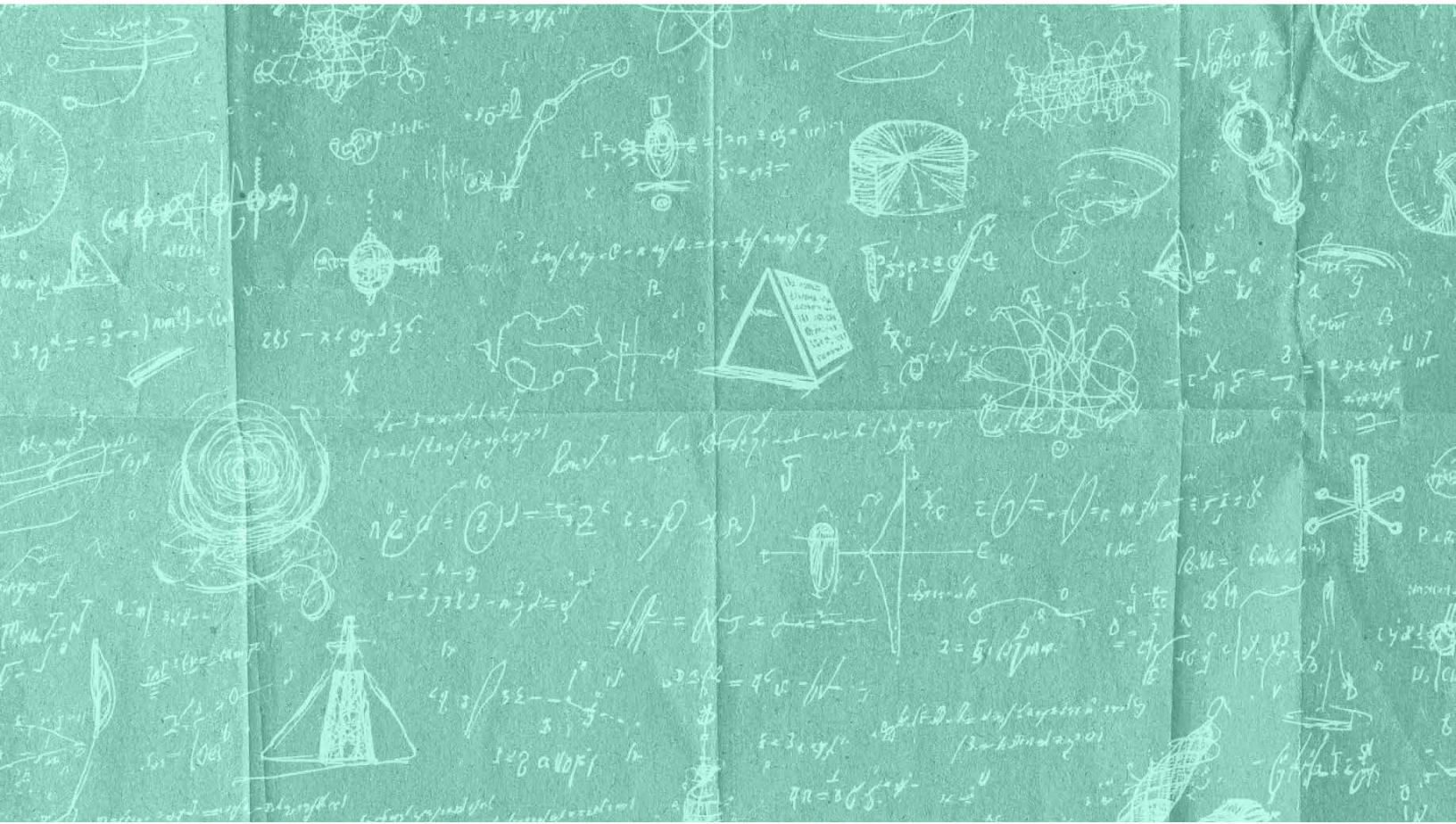
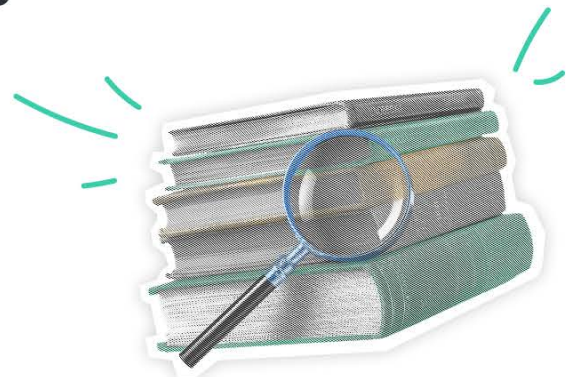




A GUIDE TO

Framing Unbiased Research Prompts

How the questions you ask shape the evidence you find

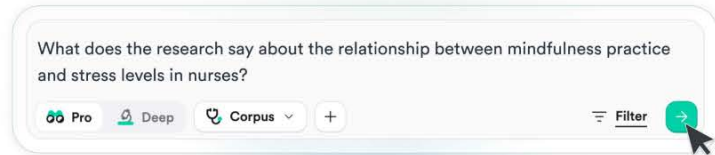


01

The tool reflects the question

The way you phrase a question shapes the evidence you find. Ask a leading question (one that assumes a direction of effect) and you will tend to surface confirmatory evidence. Ask a neutral question (one that opens the topic up rather than closing it down) and you will get a fuller, more balanced picture.

Does mindfulness ~~reduce~~ stress in nurses?



This is important because AI tools do not correct for the direction of your question. When you type a question into an AI research tool, you are not just searching — you are directing it. The words you choose, and the assumptions baked into them, shape what comes back.

02

Leading vs neutral: see the difference

The examples below show the same topic asked two ways. Notice how the leading version assumes an outcome before any evidence has been reviewed.

Leading question	Neutral question
<i>Does social media cause depression in teenagers?</i>	What is the relationship between social media use and depression in teenagers?
<i>Does mindfulness reduce stress in nurses?</i>	What does the research say about the relationship between mindfulness practice and stress levels in nurses?
<i>Is online learning worse than face-to-face teaching?</i>	How does online learning compare with face-to-face teaching in terms of student outcomes?
<i>Does poor sleep harm academic performance?</i>	What is the evidence on the relationship between sleep duration and academic performance in students?

Look at the word that gives the game away. “Cause”, “reduce”, “worse”, “harm” — each one assumes an answer before any evidence has been considered. The neutral version replaces that assumption with an open question: what does the evidence actually say?

03 Common pitfalls to avoid

Leading questions are the most common problem, but they are not the only one. Here are five pitfalls that can undermine your search before it begins.

Pitfall	What goes wrong	Quick fix
<i>Leading questions</i>	<i>Assumes the answer in the question itself</i>	Does x help y? → What is the evidence on the relationship between x and y?
<i>Built-in assumptions</i>	<i>Treats an unproven claim as fact</i>	Why does stress cause burnout? → What is the relationship between stress and burnout in healthcare workers?
<i>Vague phrasing</i>	<i>Too broad to surface useful evidence</i>	Is technology bad for you? → What does the evidence say about the effects of screen time on sleep quality in adolescents?
<i>Double-barrelled questions</i>	<i>Two questions hiding in one</i>	Does exercise improve mood and concentration? → What is the evidence on the relationship between exercise and mood in adults? — and separately — What is the evidence on the relationship between exercise and concentration in adults?
<i>Jargon and abbreviations</i>	<i>Misread by AI; limits results</i>	Does CBT reduce GAD? → What is the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy for generalised anxiety disorder symptoms in adults?



04 A simple formula

If you are unsure whether your question is neutral, try this reframe:

Instead of: “Does X help Y?”

Try: “What is the evidence on the relationship between X and Y?”

You can make it more specific by adding context: who the population is, what the setting is, or what outcome you care about. That specificity is what takes a decent question and makes it a good one.



Putting it into practice: a worked example

Here is how you can move from a first instinct to a well-formed question.

First instinct:

“Does social media cause anxiety in university students?”

What’s wrong:

The word “cause” assumes a causal relationship that the evidence may not support. “Social media” is also vague — it could mean passive scrolling, active posting, or comparison behaviour, all of which the literature treats differently.

Apply the formula:

“What is the evidence on the relationship between social media use and anxiety symptoms in university students?”

Add specificity:

“What does the evidence say about the relationship between passive social media use and anxiety symptoms in undergraduate students aged 18–25?”

The final version is open, specific, and free of assumptions. It will surface a wider and more useful range of evidence than the original. The research studies that fit your exact research question may not exist; however, Consensus will give you the closest available research because it now knows what you are looking for.

The screenshot displays the Consensus app interface. At the top, the search bar contains the text "Social Media Passive Use Anxiety". Below the search bar, the title "Passive Social Media Use and Anxiety Symptoms in Undergraduate Students Aged 18–25" is visible. The main content area shows an introduction section with a paragraph of text. To the right, there is a "References" section with a list of search results. The first result is titled "Relationship between Social Media Use and Social Anxiety: Mediation Effect of Communication Capacity" and is dated 2023. The second result is titled "Communication attributes modify the anxiety risk associated with problematic social media use: Evidence from a prospective study" and is dated 2025. The third result is titled "Lonely and scrolling during the COVID-19 pandemic: understanding the relationship between problematic social media use and mental health link among university students" and is dated 2024. A magnifying glass icon is overlaid on the search results.

05

Your pre-search checklist:

Before you search, ask yourself:

- ☐ Does my question assume a direction of effect (help, harm, improve, worsen)?
- ☐ Does it contain a hidden assumption I haven't tested?
- ☐ Is the population specific enough — age, setting, condition?
- ☐ Is it one question, or two questions in disguise?
- ☐ Have I used plain language rather than jargon or abbreviations?
- ☐ Would a different phrasing of this question lead to a different answer?

06

What comes next

Once you can ask a neutral, well-framed question, you are ready to go further. The companion guide [From Framework to Prompt](#) introduces structured frameworks — PICO, SPIDER, PEO, and others — that help you build on the skills practised here.

The ability to ask a good question is not a small thing. It is where all good research begins.

A final thought

AI does not think for you — it starts where you point it. The quality of your question is the quality of your research.



About Consensus

Consensus is an AI-powered search engine for scientific research papers. Our mission is to make the world's best knowledge more accessible for all.

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