

# GUIDING QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE WHETHER YOUR RESEARCH REQUIRES ETHICS APPROVAL

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## Purpose

The purpose of this guideline is to help individuals determine whether their project requires Research Ethics Board (REB) review and approval or whether it is exempted under one of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2) exemptions. This guideline seeks to help identify differences between (1) research projects, (2) program evaluations, (3) quality improvement studies, (4) usability studies, and (5) creative practices. Below are brief definitions. \*i

- 1) **Research projects** seek to further “knowledge through a disciplined inquiry or systematic investigation.” (p. 15) \*\*
- 2) **Program Evaluations** assess the quality of a program or operation (e.g., course instructor evaluations, training program assessments, exit interviews with employees, etc.).
- 3) **Quality Improvement Studies** seek to assess how well a product or service is working with the aim of improving the performance of the product or service (e.g., customer survey questionnaires, comment cards, productivity assessments, etc.).
- 4) **Usability Studies** aim to evaluate a product or service by examining how participants use the product or service (e.g., testing how individuals use a mobile application, observing how individuals navigate a website, etc.).
- 5) **Creative Practices** are processes through which an artist makes, interprets, or studies works of art. It may also “include a study of the process of how a work of art is generated” (p. 18, e.g., photography, film productions, music creation, etc.).

## Instructions

Using the chart below, carefully reflect on the nature of your project, and try to determine (using the responses in the chart) whether your project more accurately resembles research, program evaluation, quality improvement, usability testing, or a creative practice. If none of your responses resembles the content in the research column, your project most likely does not require REB review. If either some, or all, of your responses resemble the content in the research column, it is likely that your project is a research project or a dual-purpose project (e.g., a research project and a program evaluation project), and *will require REB review*.

**N.B.** If you are unsure whether your project requires REB review or whether it falls under one of the exemptions, please contact the REB for clarification and guidance. Projects that fall outside of the scope of the REB may nonetheless benefit from consultation with the REB. You may contact the REB by emailing [rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca) or by calling 416-979-5042.

## Guiding Questions to Determine Research Projects from Non-Research Projects

Guiding Question	Research Projects	Program Evaluations	Quality Improvement Studies	Usability Studies	Creative Practices
1. <i>What type of question does the project seek to address?</i>	Have a clearly stated research question, related to theory and embedded in literature. Seek to extend human knowledge through a disciplined inquiry or systematic investigation.	Questions are likely to be along the lines of “how is ‘x’ working?” Or “what happens to ‘x’ when we do ‘y’?” They seek to assess how well a program or operation is working, and determine the need for change.	Questions are likely to be along the lines of “how is ‘x’ working?” Or “what happens to ‘x’ when we do ‘y’?” They seek to assess how well a product or service is working, and determine the need for change.	Questions are likely to be along the lines of “how do users use ‘x’”? Or “how can we make the user experience better?” They seek to evaluate a product or service based on how users interact with said product or service.	Typically do not involve answering a quantitative or qualitative question; rather, generally seek to create or interpret a work of art.

<b>Guiding Question</b>	<b>Research Projects</b>	<b>Program Evaluations</b>	<b>Quality Improvement Studies</b>	<b>Usability Studies</b>	<b>Creative Practices</b>
<i>2. Is the primary purpose of the project to produce results that could be published in a research journal?</i>	Yes. The primary purpose is to expand a body of knowledge via the discovery of new facts, the development of new theories, or the collection of new information.	No. The primary purpose is to assess the functioning of a program in order to improve the program going forward. Publication may be a secondary goal.	No. The primary purpose is to collect data in order to improve a product, service, or process. Publication may be a secondary goal.	No. The primary purpose is to evaluate a product or service by testing it with representative users. Publication is unlikely.	No. May seek to contribute to the world of art or may seek to express art, without any further aim.
<i>3. Who is the primary audience?</i>	Scholars, practitioners, or organizations outside of the individual/group conducting the research.	May be the person conducting the evaluation or those in charge of overseeing the program that is being evaluated. Others may have a secondary interest in the data collected.	May be the design team responsible for improving the product or service, those responsible for overseeing the product or service, or those with a vested interest in the study.	The individual/team responsible for improving, evaluating, and bettering the product or service.	May be the artist, other artists, or experts in the field, followers, or the general public.
<i>4. Are the results transferable or generalizable beyond the sample?</i>	Yes. Research projects seek to produce results that are transferable and generalizable beyond the particular study.	No. Do not seek to produce results that are transferable or generalizable beyond the particular program, process, organization, or operation, though they may produce data that can be shared and adapted to other similar environments.	No. Do not seek to produce results that are transferable or generalizable beyond the particular product or service. They may produce data that can be shared and adapted to other similar products and services.	No. Do not typically produce results that are transferable beyond the particular study or product being tested.	No. Do not typically produce results that are transferable beyond the particular creative endeavor.

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<i>5. What is the role of theory?</i>	Research projects may either work with, develop, or test theories with the aim of furthering human knowledge.	Theory is typically used to design or evaluate a program, but testing or developing a theory is not a central goal of the study.	Theory may be used to assess the performance of a product or service, but testing or developing a theory is not a central goal of the study.	Theory may be used to evaluate a product or service. Testing or developing a theory is not typically a part of the study.	Theory may or may not play a role in creative practices. Those that draw on theory may do so in various ways depending on the type of creative practice.
<i>6. Does the project impose burdens on participants beyond normal expectations?</i>	Research participants are typically asked to engage in tasks beyond routine care, program provision, or role performance.	Participants may be asked to provide additional information regarding their satisfaction with an ongoing program or operation.	Participants may be asked to participate in additional exercises for evaluative purposes (e.g., filling out comment cards, questionnaires, etc.).	During the discovery phase, participants may be invited to test a product or service. Once the product or service is made available, typically there are no additional burdens. • participating in usability studies.	Creative practices may or may not impose burdens on participants beyond normal expectations. This will depend on the type of creative practice.
<i>7. Would the data be routinely gathered anyway?</i>	Require novel data collection, or in the case of secondary data analysis, may require asking new questions beyond the purpose for which the data was initially collected.	The data collected from program evaluations may or may not be gathered as regular practice.	During the discovery phase, they may require novel data collection. Once the product or service is available to the public, data is typically gathered.	During the discovery phase may require novel data collection. Once the product or service is available to the public, data is typically gathered.	Do not typically involve data collection; there are exceptions of course (e.g., when a production team needs to gather information for a documentary).
<i>8. Is there an assumption of benefit?</i>	No. While benefits may be desirable, benefits are not assumed.	Yes. The goal is to improve upon the program or operation. Program evaluations may be discontinued if found unable to be of any benefit.	Yes. The rationale for conducting them is to be able improve the product or service. Studies are presumed effective, and not experimental in nature.	Yes. They are conducted to provide useful feedback to individuals and research teams in order to evaluate and better their products and services.	No. They may or may not be of benefit to those who engage in the practice.

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<i>9. Who is likely to benefit from the results?</i>	The academic community – via the research project’s contribution to knowledge.	Those in charge of managing the program or operation. Future users of the program and those involved in the operation are likely to benefit as well.	Those in charge of managing the product or service. Users of the products and services may benefit as well.	Those in charge of managing the product or service. Users of the products and services may benefit as well through improved usability.	Results of creative practices may or may not be of benefit. If there are benefits, these may go to the individual(s) partaking in the creative practice, a particular community, or the general public.
<i>10. Where will participants come from?</i>	Research participants are often actively recruited. They may be recruited from within an organization or outside of an organization.	Participants typically come from within the organization that is running the program or from the operation being evaluated.	Participants are generally individuals who might use – or already do use – the product or service being tested.	Participants are generally individuals who might use – or already do use – the product or service being tested.	Participants will typically come from within the creative practice domain (e.g., a film producer will typically hire actors within the film industry).
<i>11. Would the project still be conducted even if the results might not be applicable anywhere else?</i>	No. Research projects are conducted, in part, with the aim of producing similar results elsewhere.	Yes. They would still be conducted even if the results are not applicable elsewhere. The primary intent is to collect data for a specific program or operation.	Yes. They would still be conducted even if the results are not applicable elsewhere. The primary intent is to gather information for a specific program or service.	Yes. They would still be conducted even if the results are not applicable elsewhere. The primary intent is to gather information for a specific program or service.	Yes. They do not typically seek to produce results that might be applicable elsewhere. In some cases, (e.g., fashion designs) applicability elsewhere may be desirable.

Guiding Question	Research Projects	Program Evaluations	Quality Improvement Studies	Usability Studies	Creative Practices
<i>12. Is the project part of a continuous process of gathering or monitoring data within an organization?</i>	They may or may not be part of a continuing process of gathering or monitoring data within an organization.	They are typically part of a continuing process of gathering or monitoring data within an organization.	They tend to occur during the discovery phase. They may or may not be ongoing as part of a continuing process of gathering or monitoring data.	They primarily occur before a product or service is made widely available. It may also be part of an ongoing process of gathering or monitoring data.	Partaking in creative practices may be ongoing (e.g., live-performances) or may be a one-time practice, such as a sculptor sculpting a statue or a painter painting a portrait.

**If you remain unsure whether your project requires REB review, please contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board at [rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca) or 416-979-5042**

<sup>i</sup> \* This guideline draws from and benefited greatly by the “Guidelines for Differentiating among Research, Program Evaluation and Quality Improvement” developed by Research Ethics at Dalhousie University.

\*\*All page references refer to the online version of the TCPS 2 (2014). Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2014*.