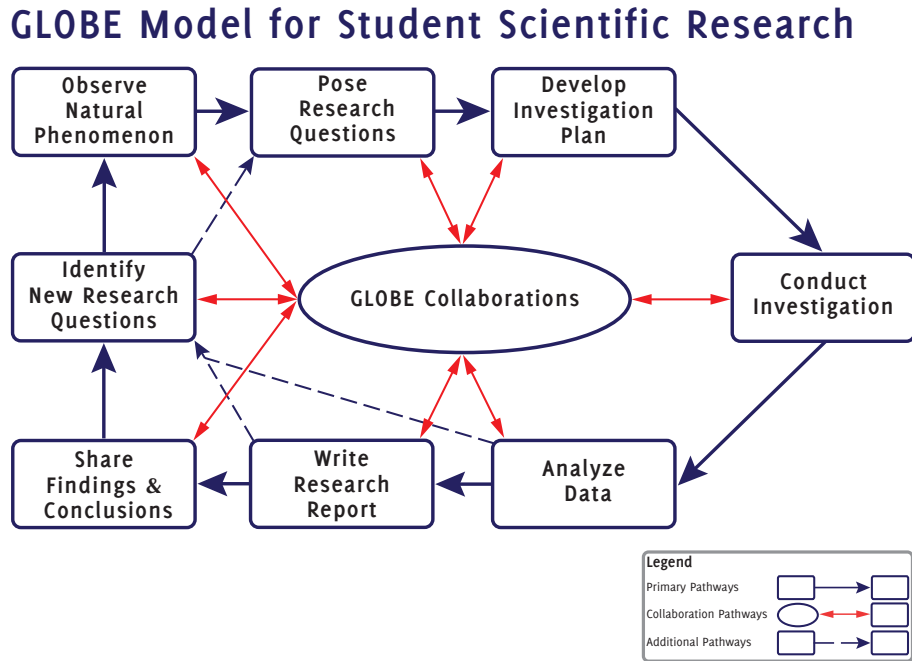


# PLANNING GUIDE FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH



The above GLOBE Model for Student Scientific Research (GMSSR) was developed by GLOBE in 2011 to illustrate the process of student scientific research. According to the GMSSR schematic diagram, the student scientist often follows a primary pathway beginning research with an initial observation of natural phenomenon and then developing a question and investigation plan. The investigation plan leads to the investigation, analysis, reporting of the conclusions, and finally to additional research questions. The steps followed may vary somewhat in each scientific study.

When supporting students during the planning and execution of their own science research, refer to the GMSSR diagram along with the following questions to guide their process. Students may use a science notebook to record their research from the planning phase to the investigation phase.

The research process will closely follow the inquiry cycle depicted above however at all times students must be willing to stray from the primary pathway returning to and revising their question or investigation plan based on their initial research.

## PLANNING PHASE:

### 1. What scientific topic will students investigate?

Often you will select the topic so that the student investigations align with particular curriculum aims and expectations established by the district, state, and/or national science standards. In this way you also ensure that the topic is feasible within a classroom environment and the available resources.

EXAMPLE:

Teacher-selected topic: Impact of Climate Change on Local Biomes

### 2. Given the topic what do students observe and wonder as scientists? What is the main question that students want to investigate?

*Students make preliminary observations of natural phenomenon using appropriate resources such as field or laboratory protocols, existing data sets, and scientific reports. They use these initial observations to develop a question for research.*

*Encourage students to develop a question that strongly interests them. Sometimes (but not always) the inquiry question is posed in the form of a hypothesis statement.*

The degree to which you give students responsibility to identify a question will depend on the level of inquiry you are targeting for your students. When students have minimal prior experience generating research questions, they will need you to model how a scientist develops a topic into a well-designed study through a guided inquiry approach. Keep in mind that most students are unfamiliar with the topic area and process involved with conducting research. One way to prompt brainstorming research questions is to provide an opportunity to conduct preliminary observations about the topic. For instance, provide students with an existing data set and ask them to notice patterns and relationships between the variables. A

brief writing exercise with prompts such as “These data make me wonder...” can help students brainstorm some potential questions. KWL charts concerning the topic area also support the generation of questions. Another effective prompt is a list of simple and available materials. The materials on the list should be selected to stimulate questions related to the topic area (Cothran et al., 2006).

EXAMPLE:

Prompts to generate questions:

In this example, students are provided multiple prompts. First they conduct field observations in a vegetation plot in a local forest to describe the abundance of tree species locally. Second, students explore the *Climate Maps* available on the Student Climate Data website and describe expected changes in climate in the Northeast. As a result of both the field activity and the exploration of the *Climate Maps*, students begin to generate questions about how the local biome, in particular the abundant tree species, may be impacted by climate change.

As students develop questions—both the main question and associated sub-questions—support their interests and offer input gearing students to a final research question that is specific, focused, and feasible. Have beginning students limit the number of independent variables to one.

EXAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Main question:

To what extent will climate change impact suitable habitat of the two most abundant tree species in local Northeastern forests?

Sub questions:

- What are the two or three most abundant tree species in our local forest?
- What are the expected changes in climate (annual temperature and precipitation) in the Northeast?

Some studies will include hypotheses. In the above example we could restate the question in the form of a hypothesis: Climate change will decrease the extent of suitable habitat for the abundant tree species in the local Northeast forest. Hypothesis testing is most useful when conducting controlled experiments. An excellent resource for designing experiments is Cothron et al.’s book entitled Students and Research (2006).

3. Students identify the variables and develop an investigation plan.  
*What kind of data will address the research question? Consider the variables included in your research. What are the independent variables? What are your dependent variables? What are the controls?*

Planning Matrix for Research Design

<b>What do I need to know?</b>	<b>What kinds of data will I need? Independent or dependent variable?</b>	<b>How will I collect/obtain this data?</b>
types of tree species	abundance of tree species per area to determine the most abundant type	vegetation plots in local forest
climate changes in the Northeast	average change in precipitation and temperature between present day and future (independent variable)	climate model predictions for annual precipitation and temperature for the Northeast according to <i>Climate Maps</i>
if the future climate will support certain tree species	changes expected in habitat suitability for trees species that are abundant locally (dependent variable)	habitat suitability predictions based on the <i>Tree Atlas</i> tool

Determine the most effective step-by-step procedure in order to investigate the question.

EXAMPLE:

A concise version is included here. Depending on your learning objectives, the students' procedures will vary in the level of detail. For a more detailed procedure, please see the *Biome Learning Sequence*.

1. First, conduct preliminary observations in a field plot using the GLOBE Carbon Cycle or Student Climate Data field protocol to describe the most abundant tree species in the local forest.
2. Use the *Climate Maps* visual data tool on the Student Climate Data website to describe the anticipated future trends for annual precipitation and temperature in the Northeast.
3. Using the Tree Atlas tool, compare current and future predictions for the habitat suitability of the two or three species identified in Step 1.

## INVESTIGATION PHASE:

1. Conduct the investigation and record data in a systematic manner.

*Does the investigation plan work? Does the investigation plan require revision? Do students have the proper equipment and do they know all the safety precautions? How will students organize and display data in a systematic manner (charts, graphs, field notes)?*

Once students have designed the procedure and before students execute the investigation, review their plan and offer input to ensure feasibility of their proposed inquiry. For instance, if students propose to measure local tree biomass in their schoolyard, then you must have enough land available for a field plot study. If sufficient land is not available, then students could adjust their research question and measure biomass according to the computer-based Biomass Accumulation Model.

Before students conduct their first observation or measurement, provide, co-construct, or ask students to design a data table to record findings. Initially, students will need practice constructing data tables. During this early stage, construct a class data table to show students: 1. how to use the vertical columns for all variables; 2. record values of each variable in the rows; and 3. include titles and units in table column headings.

Student scientists display their main findings as graphs, a pictorial form of communicating their data. Students usually construct bar or line graphs. To successfully construct graphs students will need to practice how to identify data for which a bar graph or a line graph is most appropriate. You can provide them with established data sets to practice this skill. Once the type of graph is determined, students will determine the graph axes, scale for axes, and plot the data. Finally, students will summarize trends based on the graph. This last step is often the most difficult for students and may need your guidance.

## 2. Analyze and interpret data

*Students consider the results and then analyze based on their scientific background, the strength of their evidence, and logic to decide what the evidence means and which model or explanation best characterizes the data.*

The analysis and interpretation will greatly depend on the type of study conducted. Nonetheless, in any study, students will compare outcome variables, consider variation among the outcome variables, identify trends for individual variables and among variables, and state to what degree the data supports the original hypothesis.

## 3. Share findings and conclusions

*Consider a means of communicating students' major findings. How will they summarize data? Will they develop additional charts, graphs, and diagrams to communicate the findings? Some options include: speaking about their study, writing a report, or creating a presentation research poster.*

Communicating scientific results is an important science process skill. Options for sharing findings include poster sessions, oral presentations, and brief science reports. According to Cothran et al. (2006), the following questions should be addressed in a student's conclusion: 1. what was the research question?; 2. what were the major findings and explanations for these findings?; 3. did the data support the original hypothesis?; 4. what recommendations can be proposed for further study?

## 4. Further inquiry

*Through the investigation and results analysis did any new questions develop out of the original research question? Are any of these questions substantial enough to lead to new investigations?*