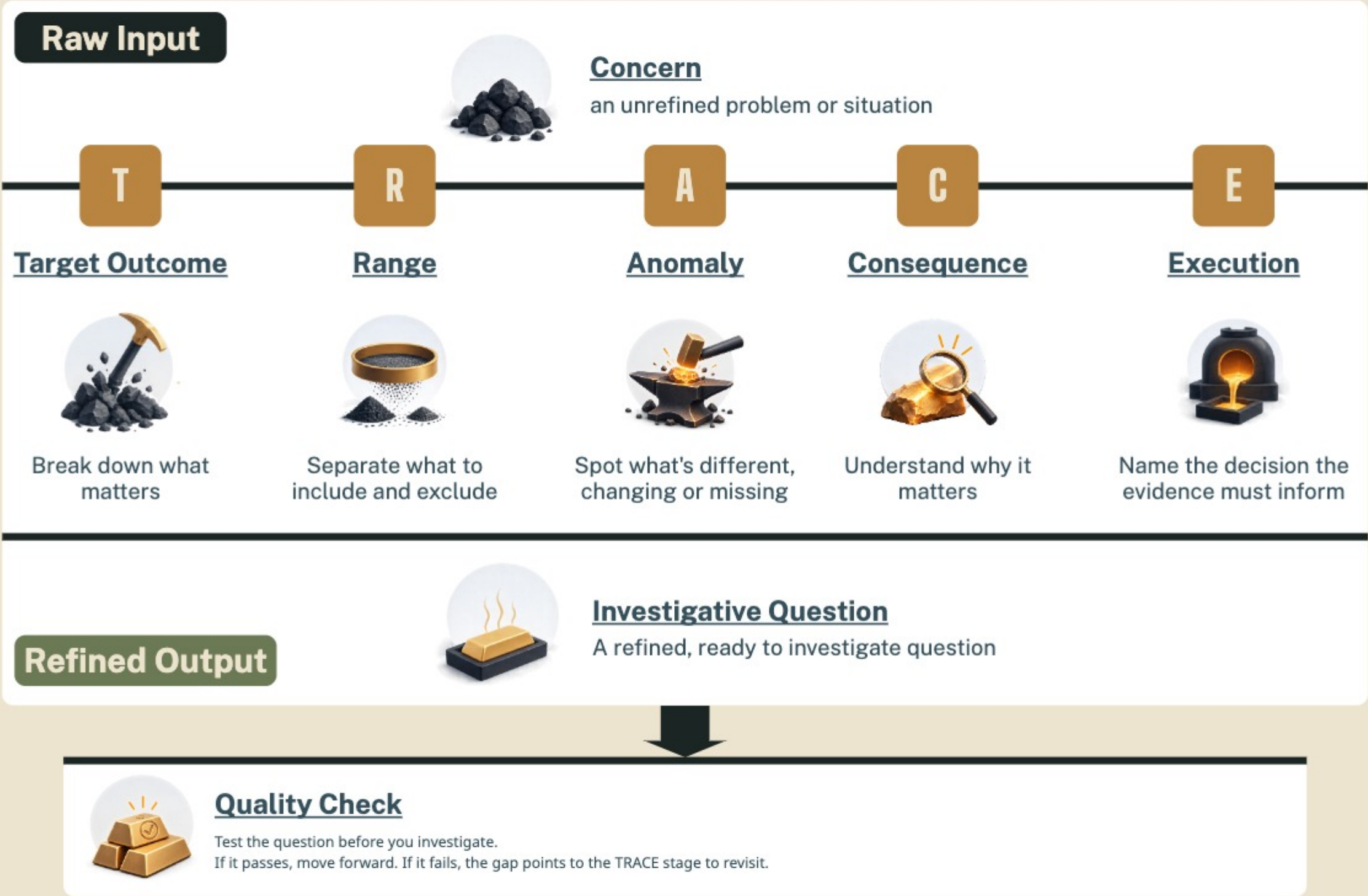


TRACE

BUSINESS QUESTION FRAMING

TRACE turns a loosely stated business concern into a precise, bounded question that an investigation can actually answer. Use it before anyone commits time to analysis, so the analysis answers something worth knowing.

FROM CONCERN TO INVESTIGATION QUESTION





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

TRACE ends with an investigation-ready question. **Data Translation** comes next, turning that question into the evidence, metrics and analysis needed to answer it.

THREE RULES

- 

1. Observation ≠ explanation.
Capture what appears to be happening before deciding why.
- 

2. Bound the question.
A question broad enough to investigate everything usually investigates nothing well.
- 

3. Don't smuggle in the solution.
Execution defines the decision the evidence must support, not the answer you expect it to produce.

Capture the concern before trying to diagnose or solve it. Don't tell us right where it came from, what you already observed, and what you are assuming, but leave the details

© 2004 Blackwell Publishing Ltd *Journal of Internal Medicine* 255: 103–110

© 2004 by the American Psychological Association or one of its allied publishers. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is not to be disseminated broadly.

4. *Stressors* is actually observed.

Downloaded from <http://ajphaphysoc.org/> at University of California, San Diego on November 10, 2014

What are you already consuming?

Copyright © 2006 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

THE CANCERS—IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Use or two sentences you must find to estimate influence on the conclusion. Equivalently, assume, not the presumption, of what.

[illegible]

WORKING NOTES - WHAT TO WATCH FOR

If you assess a life value that is an observation, and what you see that helps you there, and write that instead. Thanks belongs to column

If the conversation then continues, capture that work before interpretation efforts. You can use our tool designed to capture conversations and transcriptions.

reput is unaprobata heros. This is the only usage where it is. I shall venture therefore, as almost nothing is to be gained by

04/07/2014 10:00

Up Next: TARGET OUTCOME

Estuaries and Spring Ponds: *Chironomus tentaculatus* and *Chironomus*





TARGET OUTCOME



STAGE 2 OF 8 · ABOUT 10 MINUTES

What business result are we trying to understand or improve?

Ask in this order: what result do we care about, how would we see it move, where should it be, where is it now. Expect more than one candidate at first. List the possibilities in each block, then commit to the one you carry forward.

Context from others, if any

Only use this when someone else holds context you need. Note the function or source and keep their input separate from your own assessment.

Function:

Function:

Function:

Function:

WORK THROUGH THESE IN ORDER

1 · The result that matters

Not an activity; it's a top-level measurable, like revenue per rep or retention rate.

List all possible results

CARRY FORWARD

2 · How you'll know it's moving

Drill down: what one number could you interrogate that would show whether the result in block 1 is changing?

List all possible indicators

CARRY FORWARD

3 · Where it should be

The target for the number in block 2, and where that target came from: plan, prior period, or a commitment someone made.

List all possible targets

CARRY FORWARD

4 · Where it is now

The same number today, with the period it covers. The gap between 3 and 4 is what you are investigating.

List all readings you have

CARRY FORWARD

T OUTPUT · THE OUTCOME WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

Write one sentence naming the result and how you would see it move.

WORKING NOTES · WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- You have named an activity, not a result,** if the answer is something you would do rather than something that would move. Revenue per rep is a result; running more outbound is not.
- Two outcomes hiding in one is common. Separate them.** Continue with the one this investigation needs to answer; if both matter independently, create a separate TRACE for the other.
- If you cannot name an indicator in block 2,** the result in block 1 is still too broad. Narrow it until something measurable falls out. Leaving block 2 empty turns the investigation into a hunt for what to look for.

NEXT STAGE · 3 OF 8

Up Next: RANGE

Where you will investigate, and where you deliberately will not.

GO TO RANGE





Where should we investigate, and where shouldn't we?

Ask in this order: who, which process, over what period, cut how. Then spend real time on what is deliberately out of scope. Expect several candidates per block, then commit to the one you carry forward.

Context from others, if any

Only use this when someone else holds context you need. Note the function or source and keep their input separate from your own assessment.

Function:

Function:

Function:

Function:

WORK THROUGH THESE IN ORDER

1 · Who exactly

Population, customers or accounts: segment, region, size band, or account type.

List all possible groups

CARRY FORWARD

2 · Which process

Which motion or part of the business, and from which step to which step.

List all relevant stepps

CARRY FORWARD

3 · Over what period

The dates being examined, plus the baseline you compare against.

List all useful periods

CARRY FORWARD

4 · Cut how

The segments you will compare: by team, tier, region, persona.

List all useful segments

CARRY FORWARD

5 · Explicitly out of scope

What you are deliberately not looking at, and why: not relevant, not measurable yet, or a separate investigation. If nothing is excluded, the range is not set.

List all clear exclusion

CARRY FORWARD

R OUTPUT · THE BOUNDARY OF THE INVESTIGATION

Write one sentence: we are looking at ___ between ___ and ___, and not at ___.

WORKING NOTES · WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- "Everywhere" or "all customers" is not a range. If nothing is excluded, you have not bounded anything, and the investigation will sprawl.
- Every exclusion needs a reason: not relevant, not measurable yet, or a separate investigation. An exclusion without a reason tends to get quietly reversed later.
- Check the period has a baseline. Dates on their own show a level; a baseline is what makes a change visible.





What specifically is different, changing, missing or unexpected?

Ask in this order: what changed, against what baseline, when, by how much. Expect several candidates per block, then commit to the one you carry forward. Then sort every statement into KNOW or SUSPECT before you leave this frame.

Context from others, if any

Only use this when someone else holds context you need. Note the function or source and keep their input separate from your own assessment.

Function:

Function:

Function:

Function:

WORK THROUGH THESE IN ORDER

1 • What changed

The observed change, gap or pattern, stated as a fact with no cause attached.

NOTE

List all observed changes

CARRY FORWARD

2 • Against what baseline

What you compared it with: prior period, another segment, plan, or peer group.

List all valid comparisons

CARRY FORWARD

3 • When it appeared

First seen when, and whether it came on gradually or suddenly.

List all timing cues

CARRY FORWARD

4 • By how much

Magnitude in points, percent or absolute, and where it is worst.

List all measured differences

CARRY FORWARD

NOW SORT WHAT YOU WROTE

Take every statement from the blocks above and put it on one side or the other. Verified facts on the left, unverified hunches on the right. Be strict: if you cannot point to where it was checked, it is a suspicion.

KNOW

Checked, sourced, and you could show someone where it came from.

Sticky stack

SUSPECT

Plausible, unverified. These become the hypotheses the investigation tests.

Sticky stack

A OUTPUT • THE OBSERVATION THAT NEEDS EXPLAINING

Write one sentence from the KNOW side only: what changed, against what, when, by how much.

CAUTION

An observation is not yet an explanation.

WORKING NOTES • WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Causal language is the thing to catch. "Reps stopped personalizing" is a suspicion; "connect rate fell 9 points since March" is an observation. Move it to the SUSPECT side rather than deleting it.

A full SUSPECT column is a good outcome. Those hunches become the hypotheses the investigation tests, so capture them rather than suppressing them.

This is the stage that invites a rabbit hole. You are describing the anomaly, not solving it. If you find yourself checking data to confirm a hunch, stop and write it on the SUSPECT side instead.

NEXT STAGE • 5 OF 8

Up Next: CONSEQUENCE

Why this observation matters to the business, and what it costs to leave alone.

GO TO CONSEQUENCE



CONSEQUENCE



STAGE 5 OF 8 · ABOUT 10 MINUTES

Why does this matter to the business?

Ask in this order: work outward from the immediate effect to the business effect to the metric that carries it, then say what happens if nothing changes. Expect several candidates per block, then commit to the one you carry forward.

Context from others, if any

Only use this when someone else holds context you need. Note the function or source and keep their input separate from your own assessment.

Function:

Function:

Function:

Function:

WORK THROUGH THESE IN ORDER

1 · Immediate effect

What people feel now, in the day-to-day work.

List all direct effects

CARRY FORWARD

2 · Downstream business effect

Where it lands on revenue, cost, risk or retention.

List downstream effects

CARRY FORWARD

3 · Metric that carries it

The number a leader would see move if this continues.

List all affected metrics

CARRY FORWARD

4 · If nothing changes

Give a size or a timeframe, not just "it gets worse".

List all likely consequences

CARRY FORWARD

C OUTPUT · WHY THIS DESERVES INVESTIGATION

Write one sentence naming the business stake and what it costs to leave alone.

WORKING NOTES · WHAT TO WATCH FOR

If the consequence only matters inside one team, keep pushing. It has to reach revenue, cost, risk or retention before a leader will fund the investigation.

"It gets worse" is not a consequence. Put a size or a timeframe on it, even a rough one, so the stake is arguable rather than vague.

If you cannot name a consequence, stop here. That is a legitimate finding: this may not be worth investigating yet, and saying so is cheaper than a wasted analysis.

NEXT STAGE · 6 OF 8

Up Next: EXECUTION

The decision this evidence has to support, not the answer you expect to find.

GO TO EXECUTION





STAGE 6 OF 8 · ABOUT 15 MINUTES

What decision should better evidence enable?

Ask in this order: what decision, whose decision, what could change, what kinds of action open up. Name the choice, never the answer. Expect several candidates per block, then commit to the one you carry forward.

Context from others, if any

Only use this when someone else holds context you need. Note the function or source and keep their input separate from your own assessment.

Function:

Function:

Function:

Function:

WORK THROUGH THESE IN ORDER

1 · The decision to inform

Phrase it as a choice between options, not as a task.

List all possible decisions

CARRY FORWARD

2 · Whose decision it is

Name the person who makes the call, plus who they need with them.

List all decision owners

CARRY FORWARD

3 · What could change

What would genuinely be done differently once you know.

List changeable levers

CARRY FORWARD

4 · Types of action that open up

Types of action only, not the one you have already picked.

List all possible actions

CARRY FORWARD

CAUTION

Do not choose the solution here. Execution defines the decision the evidence needs to support, not the answer you expect to find.

E OUTPUT · THE DECISION THIS INVESTIGATION MUST SUPPORT

Write one sentence naming the choice and who makes it.

WORKING NOTES · WHAT TO WATCH FOR

The reversal test: if the evidence came back the opposite of what you expect, would the decision change? If not, the decision is already made and this is not an investigation.

If you catch yourself naming the fix, park it somewhere outside this frame and come back to it after the evidence. Writing it down stops it steering the question.

Name the decision owner even if it is you. A question with no owner tends to produce analysis nobody acts on.

NEXT STAGE · 7 OF 8

Assemble the five stage outputs into one investigation-ready question.

Up Next: INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION



[BUILD THE QUESTION](#)

BUILD THE INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION

STAGE 7 OF 8 - ABOUT 15 MINUTES

Can you state the whole investigation in one question?

Bring the five committed outputs together. Read each one across, fill the scaffold, then rewrite it so it sounds like something you would actually ask. Click any stage to jump back.



WRITE THE QUESTION

Reminder Links

Need a reminder, click the links below to get back to the output from each section.

[TRACE](#)

[RANGE](#)

[ANOMALY](#)

[CONSEQUENCE](#)

[EXECUTION](#)

Your question

In your own words, so it reads like something you would actually ask.

Start from this structure: A checklist of what has to appear. If a bracket is hard to fill, the gap is in that stage.

Where or how is [TARGET OUTCOME] changing within [RANGE], what patterns explain or help us understand [ANOMALY], how is that affecting [CONSEQUENCE], and what does the evidence imply for [EXECUTION DECISION]?

WORKING NOTES - WHAT TO WATCH FOR

If a bracket is hard to fill, the gap is in that TRACE stage, not in this sentence. Go back and fix the stage rather than wordsmithing around it.

Have someone read it cold. Someone who was not in any of this should be able to tell you what would be investigated and why it matters.

Polishing is not progress. If you are improving the wording rather than the substance, the question is done.

LAST STEP - 8 OF 8

Last step: QUALITY CHECK

Test the question before anyone commits time to answering it.

[GO TO QUALITY CHECK](#)



IS THIS READY TO INVESTIGATE?

LAST STEP - 8 OF 8 - ABOUT 10 MINUTES

Is this question ready to investigate?

Confirm an item only if it holds without qualifying it. A hedged yes is a no, and anything you leave open names the stage to go back to.



A. TRACE INTEGRITY — Seven checks

Does the finished question preserve what TRACE established?

- ☐ **Target:** The question names a measurable business outcome, not merely an activity or task.
- ☐ **Range:** The question is bounded tightly enough that we know what population/process, period and comparison belong in the investigation.
- ☐ **Anomaly:** The question describes what needs explaining without asserting an unproven cause.
- ☐ **Consequence:** The question makes clear why answering it matters to the business.
- ☐ **Execution:** The question points toward a decision that better evidence could inform.
- ☐ **No solution smuggled in:** The wording leaves room for the evidence to contradict the current expectation.
- ☐ **Standalone clarity:** Someone unfamiliar with the original concern could understand what needs investigating and why.

B. INVESTIGATION VIABILITY — Three checks

Can this question actually be answered responsibly?

- ☐ **Evidence exists or can reasonably be obtained.**
The data or evidence needed to investigate this is available, accessible, or realistically collectible.
- ☐ **The investigation has an owner.**
Someone is accountable for carrying the question through analysis and returning with an answer.
- ☐ **The answer has somewhere to go.**
The decision identified in Execution is real and can use what the investigation finds.

THE VERDICT

READY TO INVESTIGATE

All ten checks pass.

Carry the question forward to Handoff. Confirm the framing with the originator, assign the investigation, and identify any additional stakeholders who need to be involved.

NOT READY YET

One or more remain open.

Don't rewrite around the gap here. Return to the TRACE stage that owns it, resolve the gap, then run the Quality Check again.

WORKING NOTES • WHAT TO WATCH FOR

A hedged yes is a no. If you need to qualify an item to confirm it, leave it open.

Failing the first pass is normal. Two rounds through TRACE is a good outcome, not a setback. Fixing it here costs minutes; fixing it after the analysis costs the analysis.

HAND IT OFF

TRACE is complete when the question passes Quality Check. Before analysis begins, make sure the right people are aligned and the investigation has an owner.

1 • CONFIRM WITH THE ORIGINATOR

Does the final question reflect what they intended to have investigated?

☐ Not yet confirmed ☐ Confirmed ☐ Revisions requested

If revisions are requested, return to the relevant TRACE stage, update the framing, and run Quality Check again.

2 • ASSIGN THE INVESTIGATION

Investigation owner

Known blockers before they can begin

If the investigator didn't run TRACE, give them the final question and share this board for the reasoning behind it.

3 • IDENTIFY ANY OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

PERSON / FUNCTION	ROLE
	Approve / Consult / Inform
	Approve / Consult / Inform
	Approve / Consult / Inform
	Approve / Consult / Inform

Only add people whose involvement is actually required.

READY FOR DATA TRANSLATION →

Once the originator has validated the framing, required stakeholders are aligned, and an investigator owns the question, move to Data Translation to determine what evidence is required to answer it.