

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN**

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*Save this very practical set of suggestions. You may want it some day.*

### **Survey Design Generally. Writing Good Questionnaires Is Much Harder than it Looks.**

- Ideally, respondents will:
  - be willing to give the time to complete the survey
  - understand what the researcher intends to ask
  - be willing and able to access their memory or conceptual maps to retrieve the requested information accurately
  - readily fit their answer into response options given
- Problems arise when:
  - respondents don't think that the survey is important or worth their time
  - questions are ambiguous so that respondents misunderstand what the researchers intend to ask
  - different respondents interpret the questions and response options differently from each other
  - respondents have a hard time coming up with the answer in their own minds, such as if asked about details they can't remember
  - they have a hard time fitting their answers into the options given

### **General Order and Process of Interview or Questionnaire.**

- Brief introduction, typically including
  - the purpose of the study
  - the agency conducting the study
  - how the respondent was selected, possibly including respondent's characteristics (e.g., randomly selected party in case filed in Boone County Court in 2014)
  - emphasis on importance of respondent's participation

- assurance of confidentiality
  - encouragement to provide answers as honestly as possible: assurance that there are no right or wrong answers
  - estimate of time required
  - offer to answer questions about the study
  - for mail survey: instructions for returning the survey. (It is a good idea to include a self-addressed, stamped return envelope if you can afford to do so.)
- Solicitation of respondent consent following procedures approved by authorizing body, e.g., Institutional Review Board if applicable.
  - Some general background questions about the respondent that may help orient respondents to the subject of the survey and/or provide the interviewer information to be used later in the interview. Usually the initial questions are innocuous and easy to answer so that they maintain respondents' interest in completing the interview. These questions should not raise issues that respondents might find offensive, threatening, confusing, or boring.
  - Questions should follow a logical order.
  - Questions on similar topics are generally grouped together.
  - General questions should normally precede specific questions on the same topic.
  - Use "filter" or screening questions to skip questions that may be irrelevant for some respondents. Example: "If respondent answers 'no,' go to question 7."
  - Put more sensitive questions (e.g., about personal, moral, or controversial matters) later in the interview. This will provide more time to generate rapport and reduce the likelihood that the respondent will break off the interview.
  - In standardized interviews, if there are open questions, they may be placed toward the end to catch information not elicited in the closed questions.
  - One may include several questions getting at the same concept to increase the reliability of responses.
  - Often end survey with demographic information that may seem sensitive, e.g., age, income, race, ethnicity, religion etc.

## Format of Questions.

- **Questions must be clear. It is important to use simple language and concepts.** If necessary, define concepts in the question. Generally, it is useful to explicitly refer the scope of things that the question refers to (e.g., ask about things within a particular geographic area, time period, class of events). Especially for closed questions, virtually all respondents should interpret the questions and possible answers the same way.
- Specific and concrete questions are generally better than general and abstract questions
- Avoid double-barreled questions. Eg, what do you think about the time and expense of mediation?
- Avoid questions using the negative or, if you include such questions, highlight the negative terms with underlining or emphasis when spoken. Negative terms may be “not,” “least,” etc. Watch out for *implicit negatives*: control, restrict, forbid, oppose, ban etc. So use  
  
“Do you favor or oppose a law **allowing** abortion ...” instead of  
“Do you favor or oppose a law **prohibiting** abortion ...”
- Avoid loaded questions. Avoid questions with provocative terms. Questions should be balanced so that they do not suggest that the researcher favors some answers over others.
  - One way to do this is to offer both ends of a continuum, e.g., “Do you approve **or disapprove** of a Balanced Budget Amendment?”
  - If some questions are “leaning” in one direction, then an equal number of questions should lean in the opposite direction and questions with the two directions should be interspersed so that questions in one direction are not all (or primarily) at the beginning.
- Note that people have limited memories, so validity of questions about the distant past is questionable. Generally avoid asking questions referring to events more than six months or one year before, and less if appropriate. (“How many disputes did you mediate in the past three years?” may not provide valid responses)
- Ratings of individual items are generally better than asking respondents to rank a number of items. If desired, a researcher can use the individual ratings to form a ranking.

## Pre-Testing.

**Pre-testing is a very important step in the survey process. No matter how well you think through a questionnaire, you will not anticipate all the problems that could make the data meaningless. Considering all the effort going into a survey, it is usually well worth the effort to debug the instrument by trying it out on people in the study population.**

- Purposes of pre-tests:
  - Check the amount of variation in answers to particular questions. (If almost all respondents give the same response to a question, the question is probably not very useful.)
  - Check whether respondents understand the questions easily and consistently.
  - Check respondents' interest and attention to particular questions and the process as a whole.
  - Check the "flow" and naturalness of the instrument.
  - Check the order of questions.
  - Check the "skip patterns," i.e., where some respondents skip some questions based on screening questions.
  - Check the timing of the process.
- Sometimes one simply uses the exact procedure to be used in actual study – like a dress rehearsal of a play.
- Time permitting, before a dress rehearsal pre-test, it can be very helpful to do "participating" pre-test (or "cognitive interviews") asking "think aloud" questions for selected questions of particular concern. (You probably wouldn't want to do this for the entire instrument.) Typical questions for this kind of pre-test include:
  - What does the question mean to you?
  - What does the term \_\_\_ mean to you?
  - (Say this before you ask a question:) As you answer, would you say what you are thinking?
  - Would your answer be any different if the question were rephrased as follows: \_\_\_\_\_. (If so:) How so?

- In evaluating respondents' responses to pre-tests, note:
  - Whether particular questions seemed to make respondents uncomfortable.
  - Whether respondents needed to have particular questions repeated or clarified.
  - Whether respondents misinterpreted particular questions.
  - Whether respondents wanted to give additional and/or different responses than offered in the instrument.
  - (For surveys administered by phone or in person:) Whether particular questions were difficult or awkward for the interviewer to read.