

## Primer on Creating Survey Questionnaires

Steps in Creating a Questionnaire:

1. Decide the information required.
2. Define the target respondents.
3. Choose the method(s) of reaching your target respondents.
4. Decide on question content.
5. Develop the question wording.
6. Put questions into a meaningful order and format.
7. Check the length of the questionnaire.
8. Pre-test the questionnaire.
9. Develop the final survey form.

Good Survey Questions:

1. **Evoke the truth.** Questions must be non-threatening.
2. **Ask for an answer on only one dimension.** The purpose of a survey is to find out information. A question that asks for a response on more than one dimension will not provide the information needed. For example, a researcher investigating a new food snack asks "Do you like the texture and flavor of the snack?" (double barrel questions)
3. **Can accommodate all possible answers.** Multiple choice items are the most popular type of survey questions because they are generally the easiest for a respondent to answer and the easiest to analyze. Asking a question that does not accommodate all possible responses can confuse and frustrate the respondent. For example:  
What kind of food do you like?  
☐ Spicy      ☐ Mild...
4. **Have mutually exclusive options.** A good question leaves no ambiguity in the mind of the respondent. There should be only one correct or appropriate choice for the respondent to make. For example:  
Where did you grow up? \_\_\_  
A. country  
B. farm  
C. city
5. **Produce a variability of responses.** When a question produces no variability in responses, we are left with considerable uncertainty about why we asked the question and what we learned from the information. If a question does not produce variability in responses, it will not be possible to perform any statistical analyses on the item. Example:  
What do you think about this report? \_\_\_  
A. It's the worst report I've read  
B. It's somewhere between the worst and best  
C. It's the best report I've read
6. **Follow comfortably from the previous question.** Writing a questionnaire is similar to writing anything else. Transitions between questions should be smooth. Grouping questions that are similar will make the questionnaire easier to complete, and the respondent will feel more comfortable. Questionnaires that jump from one unrelated topic to another feel disjointed and are not likely to produce high response rates.
7. **Do not presuppose a certain state of affairs.** Among the most subtle mistakes in questionnaire design are questions that make an unwarranted assumption. For Example:

Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance? (Yes or No)

This question will present a problem for someone who does not currently have auto insurance. Write your questions so they apply to everyone. This often means simply adding an additional response category.

Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Don't have auto insurance

One of the most common mistaken assumptions is that the respondent knows the correct answer to the question. Industry surveys often contain very specific questions that the respondent may not know the answer to. For example:

*What percent of your budget do you spend on direct mail advertising?* \_\_\_\_

8. **Do not imply a desired answer.** The wording of a question is extremely important. We are striving for objectivity in our surveys and, therefore, must be careful not to lead the respondent into giving the answer we would like to receive. Leading questions are usually easily spotted because they use negative phraseology.

Wouldn't you like to receive our free brochure?

9. **Do not use emotionally loaded or vaguely defined words.** This is one of the areas overlooked by both beginners and experienced researchers. Quantifying adjectives (e.g., most, least, majority) are frequently used in questions. It is important to understand that these adjectives mean different things to different people.

10. **Do not use unfamiliar words or abbreviations.** Remember who your audience is and write your questionnaire for them. Do not use uncommon words or compound sentences. Write short sentences. Abbreviations are okay if you are absolutely certain that every single respondent will understand their meanings. If there is any doubt at all, do not use the abbreviation.

11. Are not dependent on responses to previous questions. **Branching in written questionnaires should be avoided.** While branching can be used as an effective probing technique in telephone and face-to-face interviews, it should not be used in written questionnaires because it sometimes confuses respondents. An example of branching is:

1. Do you currently have a life insurance policy ? (Yes or No) If no, go to question 3

2. How much is your annual life insurance premium ? \_\_\_\_\_

These questions could easily be rewritten as one question that applies to everyone:

1. How much did you spend last year for life insurance ? \_\_\_\_\_ (write 0 if you don't own life insurance)

12. **Do not ask the respondent to order or rank a series of more than five items.**

Questions asking respondents to rank items by importance should be avoided. This becomes increasingly difficult as the number of items increases, and the answers become less reliable. This becomes especially problematic when asking respondents to assign a percentage to a series of items. In order to successfully complete this task, the respondent must mentally continue to re-adjust his answers until they total one hundred percent. Limiting the number of items to five will make it easier for the respondent to answer