



# Harvard University Program on Survey Research

## TIP SHEET ON QUESTION WORDING

### General Considerations

#### **Don't Reinvent the Wheel:**

If you are trying to measure an attitude, concept, or behavior, there's a pretty good chance someone has done this before. In the course of your literature review, pay careful attention to how others are measuring the concept you want to measure. They may have already tested the reliability and validity of a measure. An identical question also allows for comparisons across surveys.

#### **Sources for pre-existing questions include:**

The General Social Survey: <http://www.gss.norc.org/>

The National Election Survey: <http://www.umich.edu/%7Enes/>

IPoll (database of 500,000 polls): <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:roperctr>  
(Harvard ID / PIN required) Must register to access.

Polling the Nations: <http://poll.orspub.com.ezpz.harvard.edu> (Harvard ID / PIN required)

#### **Pre-Test Your Survey:**

Administer your surveys to a few potential respondents (or your friends) to get feedback. Ask people to think out loud as they are answering the survey questions. Probe them: "What does that mean to you?"

The PSR's Preceptor in Survey Research is available to review questionnaires for Harvard affiliates.

The Question Understanding Aid (QUAID) evaluates syntax and test to flag some common problems with survey questions. An interactive version of the software is available at: <http://mnemosyne.csl.psy.memphis.edu/QUAID/quaidindex.html> [Registration required]

#### **Think About The Mode of Your Survey**

Surveys can be administered by mail, phone, in-person, or online, and there are different questionnaire considerations for each mode. If an interviewer is asking the questions, think about how they will sound. If a respondent is filling out the survey on paper or over the Internet, think about how it will look.

- Give instructions: If you are using an interviewer, give instructions to the interviewer, and specifically write-out any special instructions to the respondent. If the respondent reads the survey, have clear instructions on the page.
- If respondent is not able to read the question response options, be sure to keep options concise and have interviewer read the possible responses as part of the question. (e.g., How worried are you about losing your job in the near future: A LOT, SOMEWHAT, or NOT MUCH AT ALL?)

- One of biggest issues with mode is whether you offer an explicit “Don’t Know” or “Not applicable” box. As a general rule, allow this response to be volunteered in phone interview.

**Keep Your Questionnaire Short.** Respondents are less likely to answer a long questionnaire than a short one, and often pay less attention to questionnaires which seem long, monotonous, or boring.

**Keep Question Order in Mind:** Survey responses can be impacted by previous questions. Think about the context that respondents are hearing your questions.

- Start a questionnaire with an introduction. If a respondent reads the survey, provide a title for each section. If an interviewer reads a survey, write smooth verbal transitions.
- It’s usually best to start a survey with general questions that will be easy for a respondent to answer.
- Things mentioned early in a survey can impact answers later. If the survey mentions something, respondents might be primed to think of this in other questions.
- It’s usually best to ask any sensitive questions, including demographics (especially income), near the end of the survey.
- If you are asking a series of similar questions, randomizing the order respondents hear them can improve your data.

### **Filtering and Branching**

Respondents should only be asked questions that apply to them. In cases where some questions might be relevant to only some respondents, it is best to specifically determine applicability.

<b>Types of Questions</b>
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### **Open-Ended versus Closed Ended Questions:**

Open ended questions ask respondents to respond to a question in their own terms.

Closed ended questions are questions where the respondent is asked to place themselves into one of a limited number of responses which are provided to them.

- Open-ended questions allow the greatest variety of responses, but are time consuming to ask and require a lot of work to analyze
- Closed ended questions, when well designed, ensure that respondents interpret questions the same way.
- Respondents are more likely to skip an open-ended than closed-ended question

### **Rating Scales for Attitude Questions:**

- Usually between five and seven points is best
- Generally, providing a middle category provides better data
- Points on the scale should be labeled with clear, unambiguous words
- Questions which use agree/disagree scales can be biased toward the “agree” side, so it’s usually best to avoid this wording.
- Try to write questions so that both positive and negative items are scored “high” and “low” on a scale.

- The order that response categories are presented to a respondent can also influence their answer choices.
  - Primacy Effect: Occurs in paper and internet surveys: respondents tend to pick the first choice
  - Recency Effect: Occurs when questions are read to a respondent. Respondents tend to pick the choice they heard most recently
  - Randomizing or rotating response options is usually a good idea
  - In Internet surveys, radio buttons work better than drop-down menus.

## General Rules for Writing Survey Questions

**The ideal question accomplishes three goals:**

**It measures the underlying concept it is intended to tap**

**It doesn't measure other concepts**

**It means the same thing to all respondents**

**The following rules help to accomplish this:**

**Avoid technical terms and jargon.** Words used in surveys should be easily understood by anyone taking the survey. Examples: "Do you support or oppose tort reform?" "Should people held on terror related crimes have the right of *habeas corpus*?"

**Avoid Vague or Imprecise Terms.** Usually, it's best to use terms that will have the same specific meaning to all respondents. For example, it's not clear what you get when you ask "How important is it that a candidate shares your values?" You might get a more consistent answer if you asked: "How important is it that a candidate shares your religious values?"

**Define Things Very Specifically:** For example, don't ask: "What is your income?" A better question would be specific and might ask: "What was your total household income before taxes in 2005?"

**Avoid Complex Sentences.** Sentences with too many clauses or unusual constructions often confuse respondents. Scales that ask respondents to make complex calculations can cause problems. How easy will it be for a typical person to answer: "Do you think the increase in the rate of immigration, controlling for the economy, is higher or lower than the increase in the rate of crime in your area?"

**Provide Reference Frames:** Make sure all respondents are answering questions about the same time and place. For example, if you ask: "How often do you feel sad?" some people might provide an answer about their life's experience, while others might only be thinking about today. Usually, it's better to provide a reference frame: "How often have you felt sad during the past week?" Don't ask: "How good is the economy these days" and assume everyone is talking about the same economy. A better way might be to ask: "How good is the national economy these days" or "How good is the economy in your community these days"

**Make Sure Scales Are Ordinal:** If you are using a rating scale, each point should be clearly higher or lower than the other for all people. For example, don't ask "How many jobs are available in your town: Many, a lot, some, or a few." It's not clear to everyone that "a lot" is less than "many." A better scale might be: "A lot, some, only a few, or none at all."

**Avoid Double-Barreled Questions.** Questions should measure one thing. Double barreled questions try to measure two (or more!) things. For example: "Do you think the president should

lower taxes and spending.” Respondents who think the president should do only one of these things might be confused.

**Answer Choices Should Anticipate All Possibilities.** If a respondent could have more than one response to a question, it’s best to allow for multiple choices. If the categories you provide don’t anticipate all possible choices, it’s often a good idea to include an “Other-Specify” category.

**If You Want a Single Answer, Make Sure Your Answer Choices Are Unique and Include all Possible Responses** If you are measuring something that falls on a continuum, word your categories as a range. For example, the following scale misses possible responses: “What punishment should this person receive: No punishment, Five years in prison, Ten years in prison, Twenty years in prison, Life in prison, or the death penalty?” A better scale might be worded: “What punishment should this person receive: No punishment, Punishment not including jail time, Up to five years in prison, From five years to ten years in prison, From ten years to 20 years in prison, More than 20 years but less than life in prison, Life in prison, or the death penalty?”

**Avoid Questions Using Leading, Emotional, or Evocative Language.** For example, “Do you believe the US should immediately withdraw troops from the failed war in Iraq?” “Do you support or oppose the death tax?” Sometimes the associations can be more subtle. For example, “Do you support or oppose President Bush’s plan to require standardized testing of all public school students?” Some people might support or oppose this because it is sponsored by President Bush, not because of their opinions toward the merits of policy.

### **Sources of Further Reading:**

#### ***Introductory Readings:***

Converse, J. M. and Presser, S. *Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*. Sage University Paper series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, No. 07-063. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1986. *A good succinct introduction.*

Fowler, F.J. Jr. *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation, Applied Social Research Methods Series Volume 38*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995. *A good introductory text that covers the basics and a bit more than Converse and Presser..*

Payne, Stanley. *The Art of Asking Questions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980. *Originally published in 1951, this classic provides a vivid sense of how questions often sound to respondents.*

Sudman, S., & Bradburn, N. *Asking questions: A practical guide to questionnaire design*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1982. *A larger book offering thorough treatment of most types of questions.*

#### ***Sources for Attitude Scales:***

Robinson, J. P., Shaver, P. R. and Wrightsman, L. S. (eds.) *Measures of Political Attitudes* San Diego: Academic Press, 1999.

Robinson, J. P., Shaver, P. R. and Wrightsman, L. S. (eds.) *Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1991.