



WRITING SURVEY QUESTIONS: SOME BEST PRACTICES

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OVERVIEW

- Writing questions
- Response categories and scales
- Questions to collect qualitative data
- Ordering questions
- Format and layout



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GOALS IN QUESTION WRITING

- Each question interpreted the same way by all respondents
- Minimize cognitive burden
- Maximize accuracy

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THE RESPONSE TASK

- Comprehension
- Recall
- Judgment
- Formatting
- Editing

For more information, see Sudman, et al. (1996) Thinking About Answers. Jossey-Bass

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QUESTION-ANSWERING PROCESS: AN EXAMPLE

- In the past 6 months, have you used Google or another search engine to look on the internet for information about an infectious disease?
 - Comprehend individual words (Google, “another search engine”, internet, infectious disease) and put them together to understand the question, reference period (past 6 months)
 - Recall any useful information/experiences (My mother got sick and we couldn’t figure out what it was, we got that note from the school about chicken pox)
 - Make a judgment based on information retrieved (Does googling “causes for cough” count? Was mother’s illness within the past 6 months?)
 - Format response using response options (Yes, No)
 - Edit answer, social desirability

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TIPS FOR QUESTION WRITING

- Keep questions short
- Use simple words
- Define key terms
- Use a reference period
- Be specific, but use examples carefully
- Avoid “double-barreling”
- Avoid hidden assumptions
- Avoid negative grammatical structure

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KEEP QUESTIONS SHORT



In the past year, did you return to the U.S. from any overseas flights for which your wait in line at customs was more than 45 minutes, or in which you were otherwise delayed by customs for more than 45 minutes?



Q1. In the past year, did you return to the U.S. from any overseas flight?

YES → ASK Q2 NO → END

Q2. On any of these flights, did you wait in line more than 45 minutes at customs?

YES → END NO → ASK Q3

Q3. On any of these flights, were you delayed by customs for more than 45 minutes for other reasons?

YES NO

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USE SIMPLE WORDS




Do you feel that the training you received from CTD increased your sense of self-efficacy when using technological devices?



Did training from the Campus Technology Department help you feel more comfortable using a computer?

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DEFINE KEY TERMS


 In the past year, did you have any anti-scald devices installed in your home?



Some homes have anti-scald devices, often called tempering devices or faucet inserts. They are used to make the water come out of the tap at a safe temperature. In the past 12 months, have you had any anti-scald devices installed in your home?

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USE A REFERENCE PERIOD

 How often do you use the cdc.gov website?



In the past 30 days, on about how many days did you access the cdc.gov website?

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BE SPECIFIC, BUT USE EXAMPLES CAREFULLY



How many times did you exercise in the past 7 days?



In the past 7 days, on how many days did you do 20 minutes or more of moderate physical activity, such as brisk walking, swimming, mowing the lawn, or other physical activity where you might have been able to talk but not to sing the words to a song?



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AVOID “DOUBLE-BARRELING”



Do you feel your pay is competitive with similar positions in the private sector and at other local governments in North Carolina?



Do you feel your pay is competitive with similar positions in the private sector in North Carolina?


Do you feel your pay is competitive with similar positions in other local governments in North Carolina?




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AVOID "DOUBLE-BARRELING"

 Would you like to be rich and famous?


 Would you like to be rich?
YES NO


Would you like to be famous?
YES NO

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AVOID HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

 How old were you when you first smoked a cigarette?

 Have you ever smoked a cigarette?
YES → CONTINUE NO → END

How old were you when you first smoked a cigarette?

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AVOID NEGATIVE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Women with young children should not work.

Respondents may know how they feel about working mothers, but struggle to convert their judgment to the appropriate response category.

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TIPS FOR WRITING RESPONSE CATEGORIES


- Response categories should:
 - Match the format of the question
 - Be mutually exclusive (unless check all that apply)
 - Cover all circumstances
 - Not assume regularity of frequency
- Unsure/don't know option
- Don't assume respondents understand percentages
- Rethink ranking
- Beware of anchoring
- Scales

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MAKE RESPONSE CATEGORIES MATCH QUESTION

When you choose places to visit, does the potential for seeing deer influence where you go?

 1. No influence
2. Some influence
3. Strong influence

 When you choose places to visit, how much does the potential for seeing deer influence where you go?

1. No influence
2. Some influence
3. Strong influence


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USE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE RESPONSE CATEGORIES


What is your marital status?

 1. Married or cohabitating
2. Separated/Divorced
3. Widowed
4. Never married

 What is your marital status?

1. Married
2. Separated/Divorced
3. Widowed
4. Never married

Are you currently living with a romantic partner?
Yes/No


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MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE AND COMPLETE CATEGORIES

How long does an initial consultation typically take?

 1. 0.5 - 1 hour
2. 1 hour – 1.5 hours
3. > 2 hours

 How long does an initial consultation typically take?

1. Less than 1 hour
2. 1 hour – 1.5 hours ----OR---- _____ minutes
3. More than 1.5 hours


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MEASURING FREQUENCY

In the past 3 months, how often did you visit the library?

 1. Daily
2. Weekly
3. Monthly
4. Less than monthly

 In the past 10 days, on about how many days did you visit the library?

_____ days


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MEASURING FREQUENCY

In the past 6 months, how often did you visit the library's website?

 1. Daily
2. Weekly
3. Monthly
4. Less than monthly

 In the past 6 months, on approximately how many days did you visit the library's website?

0/Never
1 day
2 – 5 days
6 – 10 days
11 – 20 days
More than 20 days


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TIPS FOR WRITING RESPONSE CATEGORIES

- Unsure/don't know option
- Don't assume respondents understand percentages

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RANKING

Please rank the following factors according to how important they are when you select a dentist. Use 1 for the most important, 2 for the next most important, and so on.

- Location
- Dentist's years in practice
- Dentist's bedside manner
- After-hours availability
- Availability of laughing gas
- Color of scrubs the staff wear



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RATING

How important is each of the following factors when selecting a dentist?

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dentist's years in practice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dentist's bedside manner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After-hours availability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Availability of laughing gas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Color of scrubs the staff wear	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>


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RANKING VS. RATING

- Ranking
 - Aggregate level ordering
 - Individual level ordering
 - No measures of an item's importance relative to other items
 - Can be harder to analyze

- Rating
 - Aggregate level ordering
 - Importance of items relative to each other
 - May not know individual level ordering
 - May be less cognitively burdensome, especially for long lists of items.

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ANCHORING

In a set of response categories, respondents may assume that the “middle” means average or typical and choose/adjust their response accordingly.

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ANCHORING - EXAMPLE

Reports of daily TV viewing

Response Set A	Response Set B
Up to 0.5 hr	Up to 2.5 hr
0.5 to 1.0 hr	2.5 to 3 hr
1.0 to 1.5 hr	3 to 3.5 hr
1.5 to 2 hr	3.5 to 4 hr
2 to 2.5 hr	4 to 4.5 hr
More than 2.5 hr	More than 4.5 hr

Set A: 16% reported 2.5 or more hours

Set B: 37% reported 2.5 or more hours

Schwarz et al. (1985) "Response Scales: Effects of Category Range on Reported Behavior and Comparative Judgments" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 49, pp. 388-395.



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SCALES

- Label all points
- Avoid vague quantifiers ("usually", "often")
- Should be balanced (or unidimensional)
- Consider the presence/absence and label of a midpoint
- Reference both ends of the scale in introductory text
- Evenly space radio buttons/columns



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SCALES-CONT'D

- Not everything belongs on a scale!
- Avoid using agree/disagree for a quantity, frequency, or other “amount” response

This site has no visible garbage in the water.

Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree



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TIPS FOR OPEN-ENDED QUANTITATIVE RESPONSES

- Specify the reporting unit
- Size the answer space appropriately for the information being asked
- Punctuate the answer space appropriately (for phone numbers, dates, etc.)

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QUESTIONS TO COLLECT QUALITATIVE DATA

- Be clear what you seek
- Size the answer space appropriately
- Only one question per answer space
- Have a plan for analyzing/summarizing the data

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BE CLEAR WHAT YOU SEEK



What do you think of this webpage?



What aspects of this webpage are helpful in your daily work?

What suggestions might you offer to improve the content of this webpage?

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SIZE THE ANSWER SPACE APPROPRIATELY



In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges facing webmasters for academic research institutes?



In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges facing webmasters for academic research institutes?

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ONE QUESTION PER ANSWER SPACE



Which pages of this website are most and least helpful?



1. Which pages of this website are most helpful?
2. Which pages of this website are least helpful?

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YOU NEED A PLAN...

- Qualitative (“free text”) data can be time consuming to summarize and synthesize, especially for large numbers of responses.
- Plan ahead for whether/how you will quantify/summarize responses for stakeholders.

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ORDERING QUESTIONS

- Keep related items together
- Keep items with same reference period together (if asking about multiple periods)
- Context of previous question affects current one
- Provide transitions between sections—but sparingly
- Place most important items near the beginning
- The first question should be interesting, easy to answer, apply to everyone and not be sensitive
- Place demographic questions at the end

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FORMAT AND LAYOUT

- Just because you can, doesn't mean you should...
- Keep screen format simple and undistracting
- Paging vs. scrolling
- Forced response/Request response
- Edit checks
- Smartphone considerations



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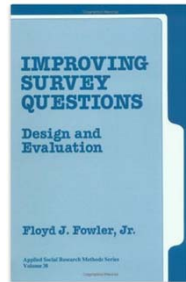
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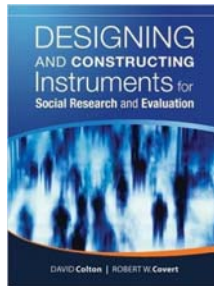
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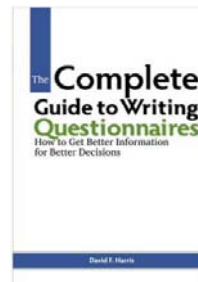
QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN-REFERENCES



Improving Survey Questions
Floyd J. Fowler, Jr.



Designing and Constructing Instruments for Social Research and Evaluation
David Colton & Robert Covert



Complete Guide to Writing Questionnaires
David F. Harris



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