

Conventional Wisdom for Crafting Questions

- Simplicity, intelligibility, & clarity
- “task difficulty” and “respondent burden”
- Questionnaires are often difficult to understand and to answer

Simple Language

- Written in standard *spoken* English
- Generally speaking, the shorter the better
- Avoid the following:
 - “double-barreled” questions
 - Double negatives (read and listen aloud)
 - Implicit negatives (e.g., ban, outlaw)
 - Mispronouncables (e.g., outlaw vs. allow)
 - Overlong lists (consider show cards)
 - Dangling alternatives (the subject must come first)
 - Percentages and proportions

Manageable Tasks

- Fine line between personal facts and personal attitudes
- Common frames of reference (e.g., family vs. persons living in the household)
 - Depends on the construct, the research purposes, the population being studied, the range of effective ambiguity
- Anything a researcher wants a respondent to hear or assume should be included in the question itself

Recall of the Past

- The most valid data are for the current, the specific, and the real
- Recall of past events or behavior is most difficult when
 - The decision was made almost mindlessly
 - The event was trivial
 - They occurred long ago
 - Require the recall of separate events
- Recall of past events or behavior is easiest when
 - Behaviors/events are salient to the individual (though time remains important)

Five Techniques to Improve Recall

- Bounded recall: addresses overreport due to forward telescoping
- Narrowing of the reference period: 6 months or less
- Averaging: useful for fluctuating behaviors
- Landmarks: holidays, events, calendars
- Cueing: avoids premature aborting of memory search

Hypothetical Questions

- Ask a hypothetical question, get a hypothetical answer
- Hypothetical questions can be useful in efforts to standardize a stimulus
- Not easy and deserve hard scrutiny before using them
- If you use hypothetical questions, consider
 - Adding at least one question on actual experience
 - Probe at least one the hypotheticals for the respondent's frame of reference

Some Interesting Complexities

- Factorial surveys use vignettes or stories in the study of judgment, decision-making, or attribution processes
- Ranking scale are interesting, but more difficult than rating scales
 - Don't require choices among items
 - Take less time
 - Can be used over the telephone
- Magnitude estimation
 - Requires instruction and practice in making proportional judgments

Experimental Evidence

- Standardized, precise, specific questioning is best
- When not enough is known to write appropriate response categories, open questions are preferred
- When measuring sensitive or disapproved behavior, open questions may be preferred
- Generally speaking, closed questions are to be preferred given greater specificity

Experimental Evidence (cont'd)

- Offer a no opinion option
- Don't explicitly provide a middle category, but do provide an intensity response option
- Best not to confound extremity and intensity
- Forced-choice items are more apt to encourage a considered response than are agree-disagree statements
- The meaning of any question can be altered by a preceding question
- Ask general before specific ones
- Use open follow-ups to closed questions
- Ask multiple questions on a topic; cast light at different angles