



DESIGNING YOUR QUESTIONS

WHAT TYPE OF QUESTIONS SHOULD I USE?

- The consultation method you have chosen will influence the design of your questions– postal surveys will need to be kept clear, simple and relatively short, whereas surveys using trained interviewers can be more complex. The following general guidelines will apply:

WHAT TYPE OF QUESTIONS ARE THERE?

- **Behavioural:** Questions about what, when, how and which. They are usually factual e.g., do you use the local library, how often, what for etc.
- **Attitude:** Used to measure perceptions, attitude and opinion e.g., how satisfied are you with the library service?
- **Awareness:** Tests public awareness and recognition of services, policies, information and publicity material e.g., did you know that the library is now open evenings and weekends?
- **Classification:** Provides information about the respondents themselves e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, disability, postcodes etc. While this information is useful for the research, this section should be optional for participants and confidentiality assured.

WHAT FORMAT CAN QUESTIONS FOLLOW?

- **Open questions:** Allow the respondent to say or write their own answer e.g., thinking about your last contact with the council, what enquiry or problem did you have? Sufficient space should give on a written questionnaire for people's answers.

- Data from open questions is, by nature, more difficult to analyse – but can provide more qualitative information.
- **Closed questions:** Allow the respondents to choose one or more answers from a range of options provided e.g., did you contact the council by phone, by letter, in person, or by email. Closed questions are much easier to analyse by giving the number and percentage of people's answers.
- **Contingency questions:** Are questions that a respondent only answers if they have answered a previous question. This avoids them having to answer any unnecessary questions.
- **Matrix questions:** Are questions where a number of questions which have the same response categories are placed one under the other in a list so that they can appear to be one question, e.g.
- **Q6.** Do you know if these household items can be recycled?

	YES	NO
Plastic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paper	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cans	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- This now looks as though you are only asking one question when actually you are still asking three separate questions!
- **Scaled Questions:** Responses are graded on a continuum. This can be used to identify which of a number of choices are the most and least popular, e.g.

Q11. On a scale of 1 – 5 rank which of the following options you most prefer and which you least prefer.

Option A	<input type="text" value="4"/>	Option D	<input type="text" value="2"/>
Option B	<input type="text" value="1"/>	Option E	<input type="text" value="3"/>
Option C	<input type="text" value="5"/>		

QUESTION STRUCTURE

- The structure of an individual question can influence how easy it is to answer.
- Wherever possible there should be a logical / natural order to the choices in a multiple choice question.
- It is always best to start with a positive rather than a negative (whether presenting the choices from right to left or top to bottom), e.g.

Excellent

Good

Ok


Poor

- When using a ratings scale higher numbers are seen as more positive. However, when ranking in order of preference number one would be the most positive number as it would stand for your first choice.
- The order in which choices are presented is important because respondents tend to pick the choices nearest the beginning of a list when they read it. When the choices are read to them (e.g. telephone or face to face interview) they tend to pick the choice heard most recently.
- Make sure that you include all relevant choices for answering a question. Missing one out can give misleading results and make the questions inclusion pointless.


THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT QUESTION WORDING


- The wording of a question can be the difference between success and failure. Here are a few of the essentials to remember:
- Keep the language simple and jargon free. Avoid technical, specialist language and acronyms. These should only be used when you are certain respondents will understand it.
- Keep the questions concise and specific. If you don't you increase the possibility of the respondent not understanding the question and either answering it incorrectly or not bothering to answer it at all.

- Try and make sure that the question wording doesn't favour one particular answer.
- Avoid leading questions that risk biasing answers. You will get different answers from asking "What do you think of the XYZ proposal?" than from "What do you think of the Republican XYZ proposal?" The word "Republican" in the second question would cause some people to favour or oppose the proposal based on their feelings about Republicans, rather than about the proposal itself. It is very easy to create bias in a questionnaire. This is another good reason to test it before going ahead.
- Avoid multiple questions in one sentence. For Example, Do not put two questions into one. Avoid questions such as "Do you buy frozen meat and frozen fish?" A "Yes" answer can mean the respondent buys meat or fish or both. Similarly with a question such as "Have you ever bought Product X and, if so, did you like it?" A "No" answer can mean "never bought" or "bought and disliked." Be as specific as possible. "Do you ever buy pasta?" can include someone who once bought some in 1990. It does not tell you whether the pasta was dried, frozen or canned and may include someone who had pasta in a restaurant. It is better to say "Have you bought pasta (other than in a restaurant) in the last three months?" "If yes, was it frozen, canned or dried?" Few people can remember what they bought more than three months ago unless it was a major purchase such as an automobile or appliance. (Survey System's Tutorial, revised June, 2005. Copyright 2005, Creative Research Systems).
- The way you phrase or write a question can have a considerable impact on your results. For example, if you were asking whether or not the respondent would support re-introducing the death penalty and just give the choices of "Yes" or "No" the percentage of support for either of them found 70-75% of the respondents choosing "Yes." Polls that offer the choice between the death penalty and life in prison without the possibility of parole show support for the death penalty at about 50-60%. Polls that offer the



alternatives of the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole, with the inmates working in prison to pay restitution to their victims' families have found support for the death penalty closer to 30%.

- So what is the true level of support for the death penalty? The lowest figure is probably truest, since it represents the percentage that favour that option regardless of the alternative offered. The need to include all relevant alternatives is not limited to political polls. You can get misleading data anytime you leave out alternatives. (Survey System's Tutorial, revised June, 2005. Copyright 2005, Creative Research Systems).
 - If you are comparing different products to find preferences use neutral names. If you call one "A" or "1" and another "B" or "2" This may make the respondent think of A as better than B etcetera. It is better to use neutral terms that avoid this.
 - Make sure your question allows the respondent to give all possible answers. For example, if you are asking "How do you travel to work?" you would include all types of transport you can think off and an "any other" option. You wouldn't just give them the choice of car or bus.
 - When providing a respondent with a number of choices you should make it clear whether you want the respondent to pick one choice or a number of choices.
 - You can also influence the respondent into only giving you a single answer by ensuring the choices are mutually exclusive.
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- You can phrase a question which pushes respondents towards a particular answer. By offering a middle ground and two extremes, respondents are more likely to go to the middle ground. For example –

Excellent OK/Average Dreadful

- **It is worth remembering that with questions that ask you to agree or disagree, more people tend to agree. This is because we have a tendency to agree with things rather than disagree.**

