



EFFECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The BASICS

The purpose of the questionnaire should be clear.

The wording should be simple and jargon free – avoid specialist language unless your consultees are specialists in the relevant area (know your audience and adapt the questionnaire accordingly)

Avoid ambiguous questions.

Avoid loaded or biased questions.

Only ask questions that are necessary (think about what information you want to get out of the question). Questionnaires should always be as short as possible.

Limit the amount of additional information you include. Respondents don't want to have to search through paragraphs and pages of text to find the questions they need to answer.

Decide what type of information you are looking for – facts / views / ideas etc...

Decide what scales will be most suitable for the information you are after (e.g. Yes/No or 1 – 5 or Very Effective – Very Ineffective). SEE RATING SCALES BELOW FOR MORE ON THIS

Decide whether questions should be open ended or closed (in other words are they allowed to say anything or do you give them choices to pick from).

Are the questions inclusive? Make sure that a respondent can give an answer even if it is Not Applicable.

QUESTIONNAIRE LAYOUT

To get the best out of your questioning the respondent needs to find it an interesting, enjoyable and stress free experience.

Questionnaires should be presented in a professional, attractive and uncluttered format. (Plenty of space between questions)

Fonts should be large enough to read; instructions for completing the survey should be easy to understand.

Where possible use colours and picture to make the questionnaire attractive.

If your questionnaire has multiple pages, it should be bound in a booklet or at least securely fixed so that pages cannot get mixed up. Each page should also be numbered.

Make the questionnaire easy to complete; the check boxes or lines easy to see; and the numbers to be circled far enough apart so the respondent or interviewer will not inadvertently circle two numbers.

Number your questions clearly. This will lessen the chance, particularly in longer surveys, of respondents or interviewers getting lost.

Start with a brief introduction describing the survey's purpose, the topics being covered and how the results will be used. Also, mention any incentive for completing the survey, such as a drawing entry, the opportunity to have a copy of the results and so on.

The questionnaire should end with a thank you message, including how and when the results will be used and publicised. If the questionnaire is postal, it will need the deadline and the return address - a prepaid envelope will increase the response rate.

You should always inform the respondent that their answers will be treated confidentially.

If your questionnaire is being posted to respondents you should always include a covering letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire and what will happen to the results.

QUESTION ORDER

The Questions should follow a logical sequence and should move from general to specific (where this is applicable). The first several questions should be:

- easy for respondents to understand
- important to the study's purpose
- engage the attention and interest of your respondent

You should avoid:

- Open Ended questions
- Lengthy, wordy questions
- Questions that which respondents might feel has a "right" answer.

In telephone surveys and interviews good opening questions will help you to build a rapport with the respondent. These questions should be light weight and easy to answer.

Questions should be grouped in easily identifiable sections. Each section should be given a title, number and where required write a sentence or phrase to introduce it to the respondent.

Important questions should not be left to the last because respondents do not always complete whole questionnaires – especially if they are lengthy.

Sensitive questions (e.g. employment, income, sexuality) should be placed toward the end of the document to help avoid alienating or worrying respondents.

Demographic questions should be put at the end of the questionnaire for the same reason and because it is better to keep respondents' minds on the purpose of the survey at the beginning, while you have their attention.

Be wary of position bias. Position bias is where different items in a list are treated differently depending on where they are positioned. For example, you might ask about service satisfaction using a number of

different attributes in a list form. The first items on a list such as this usually get treated differently by respondents than the last items do.

You can try to avoid position bias by printing several versions of the questionnaire, with the items in a different order on each but this can be impractical and costly. Alternatively, you could also randomly or alphabetically order list items and indicate in the instructions how they are ordered. This reduces the likelihood that respondents will see the first items as most important.

WHAT EFFECT DOES QUESTION ORDERING HAVE?

The order of your questions can have two main consequences that you need to be aware of:

Firstly, by mentioning something such as an idea or issue in one question can make them think of this in a later question where it is relevant but, they may not have thought of it if not previously mentioned.

If you want to reduce the chances of this happening you should try to randomise the order of your questions.

The second effect is habituation. This is relevant to those questions that all have the same answer choices (see example below). What can happen is that people start giving the same answer to each question without really thinking if that is the answer they really want to give.

Example

Q6. Do you know if these household items can be recycled?

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

One way of avoiding this is to limit the number of questions you put together in this format. The example above only uses ok, so that is likely to avoid this. However, it had perhaps 7 ore more habituation may slip in. This may also happen if your whole questionnaire uses this format. So another way to avoid this is to use a mixture of question types

RATING SCALES

Rating scales are commonly used, giving respondents an equal number of positive and negative options to tick. For example: Which phrase best describes what you think of the library service?

- very good
- good
- neither good, nor poor
- poor
- very poor
- do not know

Many researchers choose to omit the do not know field, forcing respondents to make a choice.

Numerical rating is also frequently used, e.g., on a scale of one to five, how would you rate... If this method is used, you need to make clear which number is high or very good, and you may get more middle or neutral answers.

When using numerical rating schemes you can make people give you an answer that is clearly positive or negative. This can make the analysis easier. Others feel it is important to offer a neutral, middle option.

MAKING A QUESTIONNAIRE ACCESSIBLE FOR HARD TO REACH GROUPS

The questionnaire should be clearly laid out so that respondents can easily read and follow it.

The design should be in line with RNIB clear print guidelines, to ensure that it is accessible.

Alternative formats and languages should also be offered if applicable – and where appropriate, assistance offered to complete the questionnaire.

There should be a plain English, jargon free introduction explaining what the consultation is for along with an assurance of confidentiality.

Classification or personal questions are often best left to the end of the questionnaire.

Questions should be in a logical order with simple, introductory questions at the beginning.