

## Qualities of Good Survey Questions

There are both good and bad questions. The qualities of good questions are as follows:

1. **Evokes the truth** - Questions must be non-threatening. When a respondent is concerned about the consequences of answering a question in a particular manner, there is a good possibility that the answer will not be truthful. Anonymous questionnaires that contain no identifying information are more likely to produce honest responses than those identifying the respondent. If your questionnaire does contain sensitive items, be sure to clearly state your policy on confidentiality.
2. **Asks for an answer on only one dimension** - The purpose of a survey is to find out information. A question that asks for a response on more than one dimension will not provide the information you are seeking.

For example, a researcher investigating a new food snack asks "Do you like the texture and flavor of the snack?" If a respondent answers "no", then the researcher will not know if the respondent dislikes the texture or the flavor or both. Another questionnaire asks, "Were you satisfied with the quality of our food and service?" Again, if the respondent answers "no", there is no way to know whether the quality of the food, service or both were unsatisfactory. A good question asks for only one "bit" of information.

3. **Can accommodate all possible answers** - Multiple choice items are the most popular type of survey questions because they are generally the easiest for a respondent to answer and the easiest to analyze. Asking a question that does not accommodate all possible responses can confuse and frustrate the respondent. For example, consider the question:

*What brand of computer do you own? \_\_\_*  
*A. IBM PC*  
*B. Apple*

Clearly, there are many problems with this question. What if the respondent doesn't own a microcomputer? What if he owns a different brand of computer? What if he owns both an IBM PC and an Apple? There are two ways to correct this kind of problem. The first way is to make each response a separate dichotomous item on the questionnaire. For example:

*Do you own an IBM PC? (circle: Yes or No)*  
*Do you own an Apple computer? (circle: Yes or No)*

Another way to correct the problem is to add the necessary response categories and allow multiple responses. This is the preferable method because it provides more information than the previous method.

*What brand of computer do you own? (Check all that apply)*

- Do not own a computer*
- IBM PC*
- Apple*
- Other*

4. **Have mutually exclusive options** - A good question leaves no ambiguity in the mind of the respondent. There should be only one correct or appropriate choice for the respondent to make. An obvious example is:

*Where did you grow up? \_\_\_*

- A. country*
- B. farm*
- C. city*

A person who grew up on a farm in the country would not know whether to select choice A or B. This question would not provide meaningful information. Worse than that, it could frustrate the respondent and the questionnaire might find its way to the trash.

5. **Produces variability of responses** - When a question produces no variability in responses, we are left with considerable uncertainty about why we asked the question and what we learned from the information. If a question does not produce variability in responses, it will not be possible to perform any statistical analyses on the item. For example:

*What do you think about this report? \_\_\_*

- A. It's the worst report I've read*
- B. It's somewhere between the worst and best*
- C. It's the best report I've read*

Since almost all responses would be choice B, very little information is learned. Design your questions so they are sensitive to differences between respondents. As another example:

*Are you against drug abuse? (circle: Yes or No)*

Again, there would be very little variability in responses and we'd be left wondering why we asked the question in the first place.

6. **Follows comfortably from the previous question** - Writing a questionnaire is similar to writing anything else. Transitions between questions should be smooth. Grouping questions that are similar will make the questionnaire easier to complete, and the respondent will feel more comfortable. Questionnaires that jump from one unrelated topic to another feel disjointed and are not likely to produce high response rates.
7. **Does not presuppose a certain state of affairs** - Among the most subtle mistakes in questionnaire design are questions that make an unwarranted assumption. An example of this type of mistake is:

*Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance? (Yes or No)*

This question will present a problem for someone who does not currently have auto insurance. Write your questions so they apply to everyone. This often means simply adding an additional response category.

*Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance?*

*Yes*

*No*

*Do not have auto insurance*

One of the most common mistaken assumptions is that the respondent knows the correct answer to the question. Industry surveys often contain very specific questions that the respondent may not know the answer to. For example:

*What percent of your budget do you spend on direct mail advertising? \_\_\_\_\_*

Very few people would know the answer to this question without looking it up, and very few respondents will take the time and effort to look it up. If you ask a question similar to this, it is important to understand that the responses are rough estimates and there is a strong likelihood of error. It is important to look at each question and decide if all respondents will be able to answer it. Be careful not to assume anything. For example, the following question assumes the respondent knows what Amendment 222 is about.

*Are you in favor of Amendment 222?*

*Yes*

*No*

*Undecided*

If there is any possibility that the respondent may not know the answer to your question, include a "don't know" response category.

8. **Does not imply a desired answer** - The wording of a question is extremely important. We are striving for objectivity in our surveys and, therefore, must be careful not to lead the respondent into giving the answer we would like to receive. Leading questions are usually easily spotted because they use negative phraseology. As examples:

*Wouldn't you like to receive our free brochure?*

*Don't you think the Congress is spending too much money?*

9. **Does not use emotionally loaded or vaguely defined words** - This is one of the areas overlooked by both beginners and experienced researchers. Quantifying adjectives (e.g., most, least, majority) are frequently used in questions. It is important to understand that these adjectives mean different things to different people.
10. **Does not use unfamiliar words or abbreviations** - Remember who your audience is and write your questionnaire for them. Do not use uncommon words or compound sentences. Write short sentences. Abbreviations are okay if you are absolutely certain that every single respondent will understand their meanings. If there is any doubt at all, do not use the abbreviation. The following question might be okay if all the respondents are accountants, but it would not be a good question for the general public.

*What was your AGI last year? \_\_\_\_\_*

11. **Is not dependent on responses to previous questions** - Branching in written questionnaires should be avoided. While branching can be used as an effective probing technique in telephone and face-to-face interviews, it should not be used in written questionnaires because it sometimes confuses respondents. An example of branching is:

*1. Do you currently have a life insurance policy ? (Yes or No) If no, go to question 3*

*2. How much is your annual life insurance premium ? \_\_\_\_\_*

These questions could easily be rewritten as one question that applies to everyone:

*1. How much did you spend last year for life insurance ? \_\_\_\_\_*

12. **Does not ask the respondent to order or rank a series of more than five items** - Questions asking respondents to rank items by importance should be avoided. This becomes increasingly difficult as the number of items increases, and the answers become less reliable. This becomes especially problematic when asking respondents to assign a percentage to a series of items. In order to successfully complete this task, the respondent must mentally continue to re-adjust his answers until they total one hundred percent. Limiting the number of items to five will make it easier for the respondent to answer.

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