

**TABLE 9: OPEN AND CLOSED QUESTIONS:
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

| OPEN QUESTIONS | CLOSED QUESTIONS |
|---|---|
| Tend to be slower to administer. | Tend to be quicker to administer. |
| Can be harder to record responses. | Often easier and quicker for the researcher to record responses. |
| May be difficult to code, especially if multiple answers are given. | Tend to be easy to code. |
| Do not stifle response. | Respondents can only answer in a predefined way. |
| Enable respondents to raise new issues. | New issues cannot be raised. |
| Respondents tend to feel that they have been able to speak their mind. | Respondents can only answer in a way which may not match their actual opinion and may, therefore, become frustrated. |
| In self-administered questionnaires, respondents might not be willing to write a long answer and decide to leave the question blank. How do you know the meaning of a blank answer when you come to the analysis? | Is quick and easy for respondents to tick boxes – might be more likely to answer all the questions. |
| Can use open questions to find out all the possible responses before designing a closed-ended questionnaire. | Can include a section at the end of a closed-ended questionnaire for people to write in a longer response if they wish. |

The advantages and disadvantages of open and closed questionnaires are discussed in Table 9. You need to think about whether your questionnaire is to be self-administered, that is, the respondent fills it in on his own, away from the researcher, or whether it is to be interviewer administered. Self-administered questionnaires could be sent through the post, delivered in person or distributed via the internet. It is also important to think about the analysis of your questionnaire at this stage as this could influence its design (see Chapter 11).

WORDING AND STRUCTURE OF QUESTIONS

When constructing each question think about the words you use. Avoid jargon and technical terms whenever possible. Try not to use words which may have a double meaning or be misinterpreted, as some words have different meanings for different groups of people. Don't use emotive words. Make sure the question is not ambiguous. And, above all, avoid questions which will cause annoyance, frustration, offence, embarrassment or sadness. You should never make someone feel uncomfortable, for whatever reason, as a result of filling in your questionnaire.

- **Questions should be kept short and simple.** This will avoid many of the problems outlined above. Check that a question is not double-barrelled, that is, two questions in one. If it is, ask two questions rather than one. Also, avoid negative questions – the type which have 'not' in them as this can be confusing, especially when a respondent is asked to agree or disagree.
- **Make sure that your questions don't contain some type of *prestige bias*.** This phrase refers to questions which could embarrass or force respondents into giving a false answer.

They might do this if they do not want to look 'bad' in front of the researcher, or they might do it because it is expected behaviour. Questions about income or educational qualifications might illicit this type of response, so you need to be careful about how you try to obtain this information.

- **Some issues may be very sensitive and you might be better asking an indirect question rather than a direct question.** Promising confidentiality and anonymity may help, but many respondents can, understandably, be sceptical about these promises. If you ask an indirect question in which respondents can relate their answer to other people, they may be more willing to answer the question.

Using closed-ended questions

If you are constructing a closed-ended question, try to make sure that all possible answers are covered. This is particularly important for time and frequency questions such as 'how often do you ...' You need to make sure that all the frequencies are covered so that respondents aren't constrained in their answers and tick a box which isn't right for them. Also, you want to make sure that you don't artificially create opinions by asking someone a question about which they don't know, or don't care. You need to make sure that you include a 'don't know' category in this case.

EXAMPLE

My partner is self-employed and works on his own in an office based at home. He was recently asked to fill in a questionnaire that included the following question:

Do your work colleagues swear ...

More than you?

About the same as you?

Less than you?

They don't swear.

My partner does not have work colleagues. This not only made the question irrelevant to his work situation, but also it made him feel that the whole questionnaire was not relevant and, therefore, he threw the questionnaire into the bin.

If you expect people to take the time to fill in your questionnaire, you must make sure that they can answer the questions and that they feel they are relevant and worthwhile. Not only does this question presume that the respondent has work colleagues, but it also presumes that the respondent swears, which can cause offence to some people.

Avoiding leading questions

Don't asking leading questions. The question 'How often do you wash your car?' might seem innocuous enough. However, it makes two assumptions. Firstly, it assumes that the respondent has a car and secondly, it assumes the respondent washes his car. It could be considered a prestige bias question. Would a respondent feel bad if they didn't have a car and therefore would tick 'four times a week' anyway? Would they feel bad if they don't ever wash their car but feel the researcher expects them to? If you need to ask this question, you should ask a filter question first to find out whether the respondent actually owned a car. Then you would need to ask: 'If

you wash your car, how many times a year?’ By wording the question in this way and by being careful about the frequency list, you’re not leading the respondent into answering in a certain way.

Have a look at Exercise 2 which will help you to think about some of the issues involved in the wording and structuring of questions.

EXERCISE 2

Read the following questions and decide what is wrong with them. Think about how you might overcome the problems you have identified.

1. Do you go swimming?
Never
Rarely
Frequently
Sometimes

2. What do you think about the Green Peace attempt to blackmail the Government?

3. What is wrong with the young people of today and what can we do about it?

4. How many books have you read in the last year?
None
1 – 10
10 – 20
20 – 30
Over 30

5. What is the profit of your company, to the nearest one hundred pounds?
6. What do you think should be done about global warming?

Points to consider

1. The problem with this question is in the categories supplied for the answer. Everybody has a different idea as to what words such as 'sometimes' and 'frequently' mean. Instead, give specific time frames such as 'twice a year' or 'once a month'. Also, the order of answers should follow a logical sequence – in the example above, they do not.
2. This is a very leading question which uses an emotive word – blackmail. It assumes that Green Peace is blackmailing the Government and assumes that someone knows about the issues and would be able to answer. A filter question would have to be used in this case and the word 'blackmail' changed.
3. This question is double-barrelled, leading and ambiguous. It asks two questions in one and so needs to be split up. The word 'wrong' is emotive and suggests there is something not normal about the young people of today. It asks the respondent to distance themselves and comment from the moral high ground.
4. This question may contain prestige bias – would people be more likely to say they have read plenty of books when they might not have read any? Also, the categories for the answers need modification – which box would you tick for someone who answered '20'?

5. This question assumes knowledge and could only be asked of someone who has the figures to hand. It also asks for what could be confidential information which a respondent might be reluctant to give. The word 'profit' has different meanings for different people, especially if the question is asked by an interviewer, rather than read by the respondent. In an often quoted case, when this question was used, the respondent took it to mean 'prophet' and as such was unable to answer the question.
6. In this question it is assumed that the respondent thinks something should be done about global warming and that they are able to comment on the issue. Indeed, global warming in itself is a contested issue. This question leads the respondent into having an opinion about something on which they might not otherwise have one.

LENGTH AND ORDERING OF QUESTIONS

When you're constructing a questionnaire, keep it as short as possible. If it has to be longer because of the nature of your research, think about whether your respondents will actually take the time to fill it in. Some people will do so if they feel there is some personal benefit to be gained. This is why long consumer behaviour surveys offer entry into large prize draws for completed questionnaires. If your budget is limited, you might be able to offer a copy of the final report or other information which may be of use to the respondent as an incentive.

Be realistic about how long a questionnaire will take to fill in. Saying it will take a 'moment' is not helpful. Include filter questions with answers such as 'If no, go to question 28'.

Psychologically it's good for respondents to be able to jump sections as it stops people becoming frustrated by unnecessary or irrelevant questions.

As with interviewing or focus groups, when designing a questionnaire start with easy questions which respondents will enjoy answering, thus

encouraging them to continue filling in the questionnaire. If you begin with complex questions which need long responses, your respondents will be less likely to fill in the form. If you're constructing a combined questionnaire, keep your open-ended questions for the end as, once someone has spent time completing the rest of the questionnaire, they are more likely to continue with those questions which take a little more effort to complete.

When constructing a questionnaire, you need to make it as interesting as possible and easy to follow. Try to vary the type and length of questions as variety provides interest. Group the questions into specific topics as this makes it easier to understand and follow. Layout and spacing are extremely important. If your questionnaire looks cluttered, respondents will be less likely to fill it in.

Collecting personal information

Opinion is divided about where personal information should be included on a questionnaire. I tend to include it at the end, as I believe people are more likely to fill in this information when they

TIP

When deciding how long your questionnaire should be, think about the topic and the type of people who you are hoping will fill in the questionnaire. People are more likely to spend longer answering questions about a topic that they feel strongly about, or with which they are very involved. They are less likely to spend a long time answering questions about a topic that does not interest them or a topic that they view as unimportant or frivolous.

have already invested time and energy in completing the rest of the form.

As the researcher, you need to think about collecting only that type of personal information which is completely relevant to your research. Be sensitive to the type of information people will be reluctant to give. An example of a personal profile section is provided in Fig.1. This form may seem short, but it is important not to ask for too much personal information as respondents will become suspicious and want to know why you want the information. You also need to assure them that you understand and will comply with the Data Protection Act (see Chapter 13).

PILOTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Once you have constructed your questionnaire, you must **pilot** it. This means that you must test it out to see if it is obtaining the results you require.

First of all, ask people who have not been involved in its construction to read it through and see if there are any ambiguities which you have not noticed.

Once this has been done, alter the questions accordingly, then send out a number of questionnaires to the type of people who will be taking part in the main survey. Make sure they know it is a pilot test and ask them to forward any comments they may have about the length, structure and wording of the questionnaire. Go through each response very carefully, noting comments and looking at the answers to the questions as this will help you to discover whether there are still ambiguities present.

1. Are you: Female?
 Male?

2. What is your age?
 Under 26 46–55
 26–35 56–65
 36–45 Over 65

3. To which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?
 (These categories were used in the 2001 Census and have been reproduced for ease of comparison.)

White:

British
 Any other White background (please describe)

Mixed:

White and Black Caribbean
 White and Black African
 White and Asian
 Any other Mixed background (please describe)

Asian or Asian British:

Indian
 Pakistani
 Bangladeshi
 Any other Asian background (please describe)

Black or Black British

Caribbean
 African
 Any other Black background (please describe)

Chinese or other Ethnic Group

Chinese
 Any other (please describe)

Which of the following categories apply to you?
 (Please tick all that apply.)

Housewife/husband
 Full-time student
 Part-time student
 Self-employed
 Seeking paid employment
 In part-time, paid employment
 In full-time, paid employment

Fig. 1. Personal profile form.

Alter the questionnaire again. If you have had to undertake major alterations, you may need to pilot the questionnaire again. This may seem a rather long and laborious process, but it is incredibly important, especially if you're intending to send out a large number of questionnaires.

OBTAINING A HIGH RESPONSE

Questionnaires are big business and as more and more fall through our letterboxes we become less willing to spend the time completing them. You need to make yours stand out so that all your careful planning and construction is not wasted. There are many simple measures you can take to try to ensure a high response rate.

- Is the questionnaire relevant to the lives, attitudes and beliefs of the respondents?
- Can the respondents read if they are to be given a self-administered questionnaire?
- Are there any language issues? Do you need to translate the questionnaire into another language?
- Are your intended respondents likely to co-operate? For example, illegal immigrants may be less likely to fill in a questionnaire than legal immigrants.
- Is the questionnaire well constructed and well laid out?
- Is it clear, concise and uncluttered?
- Are the instructions straightforward and realistic about how long it will take to complete?

- Has the respondent been told who the research is for and what will happen to the results?
- Has the respondent been reassured that you understand and will comply with the Data Protection Act?
- Has the questionnaire been piloted to iron out any problems?
- Can your respondents see some personal benefit to be gained by completing the questionnaire?
- Is return postage included?
- Has a follow-up letter and duplicate questionnaire been sent in cases of none response?

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN CHECKLIST

- Make your questionnaire as short as possible.
- Make sure people will be able to answer your questions.
- Don't assume knowledge or make it seem that you expect a certain level of knowledge by the way your questions are worded.
- Start with easy to answer questions. Keep complex questions for the end.
- Ask for personal information at the end.
- Use a mix of question formats.
- Don't cause offence, frustration, sadness or anger.
- Avoid double-barrelled questions.

- Avoid words with emotional connotations.
- Avoid negative questions.
- Avoid jargon and technical words.
- Avoid words with multiple meanings.
- Avoid leading questions.
- Avoid vague words such as 'often' and 'sometimes'.
- Provide all possible responses in a closed question.
- Consider as many alternatives as possible.
- Use specific time frames when asking about behaviour.
- Use specific place frames, e.g. 'In which country were you born?'

SUMMARY

- Think about how you're going to analyse your survey prior to constructing your questionnaire.
- Decide whether you're interested in behaviour, beliefs, attitudes or characteristics or a combination of the above.
- Make sure you have made the right decisions concerning open-ended questions, closed-ended questions or a combination of both.
- Decide whether your questionnaire is to be self-administered or interviewer administered.

- Think about how you intend to distribute your questionnaire, e.g. by hand, through the post or via the internet.
- Construct the questionnaire adhering to the checklist produced above.
- Include a covering letter with information about who the research is for and what will happen to the results.
- Include instructions on how to complete the questionnaire.
- Include details about how the questionnaire is to be returned (making sure you enclose a pre-paid envelope if you need the respondent to return the form to you).
- Make sure you include a date by which time you would like the questionnaire returned.
- Pilot the questionnaire and instructions to check that all can be understood.
- Amend accordingly and re-pilot.
- Send out/administer questionnaire.
- Send out follow-up letters and questionnaires to non-responders.

FURTHER READING

- Aldridge, A. and Levine, K. (2001) *Surveying the Social World: Principles and Practice in Survey Research*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Lance, C.E. and Vandenberg, R.J. (eds) (2008) *Statistical and Methodological Myths and Urban Legends*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Oppenheim, A.N. (2000) *Questionnaire Design*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

Tourangeau, R., Rips, L.J. and Rasinski, K. (2000) *The Psychology of Survey Response*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.