

Designing Questions and Surveys

Surveys (and interviews) rely on questions, but it is not easy to construct questions that will elicit the information you need, and that encourage respondents to answer openly and honestly. It is important to consider how you will be administering the survey when designing the format of the questions. It can be helpful to respondents if questions investigating similar themes are grouped together, if appropriate, using a header.

The way in which a question is worded and the manner in which it is asked are important factors in determining the kind of response you will get. For example, consider the following questions about a place to eat:

1. *You don't want to eat here, do you?*
2. *Do you want to eat here?*
3. *Wouldn't you like to eat here?*
4. *Would you like to eat at the ABC Café or the XYZ restaurant?*
5. *Where would you like to eat?*

Imagine the tone of voice and inflection used in asking these questions, and think about how differently you might respond. Questions are categorized as Open or Closed depending on the kind of response they elicit. Questions 1, 2, and 3 are dichotomous closed questions that can be answered Yes or No. In addition 1 and 3 are “leading” questions, since the way these questions are worded are likely to lead the respondents to answer in a particular way. Question 4 is a forced choice, which requires one to choose from limited options. Question 5 is open, since the responses are not restricted.

Following are examples of some of the different types of questions:

Closed question with uni-dimensional scaled response options:

For the following statement, please circle the response that is closest to your own views.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree Nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Providing a Likert scale with an even number of options forces respondents to make a decision, but at times, some resort to adding a midpoint option themselves. When providing a middle option, as above, “neither agree nor disagree”, is preferable to “neutral” because the former represents a divided opinion as opposed to not taking sides. Some research suggests that forced choice items elicit more considered responses than agree-disagree statements.

Watch the phrasing of responses given in the form of an attitudinal scale. It can often be difficult to provide a well balanced range of descriptive words in an attitudinal scale. A Likert scale using numbers or points on a scale between phrases like 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' can give a better range of options (See example of semantic differential below.) Alternatively, instead of limiting their options, you might ask the respondents to indicate their

response by placing a cross on a line in the appropriate position between opposite opinions. See <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/scallik.php> for more information on scaled response options.

Closed question with ordered response:

How often do you come to class unprepared?

- Once a week or more
- Two or three times a term
- Once a term
- Never

Closed questions with ordered response (semantic differential):

I find the academic support programs offered at this institution to be:

Helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Unhelpful
Available	1	2	3	4	5	Unavailable
Adequate	1	2	3	4	5	Inadequate

Closed questions with unordered response (checklist):

Please indicate which of the following are true for you in relation to co-curricular activities:

(mark all that apply)

- My advisor supports my interests by suggesting campus activities.
- The activities offered on campus do not really interest me.
- I would participate in more campus activities if I had time.

Closed questions with unordered response (forced choice):

*Which of the following **best** describes your attitude toward participation in class discussions:*

(select one)

- I feel shy and uncomfortable speaking in a group.
- I can discuss some topics in a group, but not personal subjects.
- I prefer to listen for some time before speaking in a group.
- I have no problem discussing any topic in a group.

When a closed question has two possible unordered responses they are also called **dichotomous questions**.

In some cases, war is justifiable.

- Agree
- Disagree

Please indicate your gender:

- Female
- Male

Combination questions:

What I like most about this institution is:

- Student body
- Academic challenge
- Faculty-student interaction
- Urban location
- Other _____

Please explain why you made the selection you did.

Rank lists:

Rank the following aspects of this institution according to their importance to you:

(1=most important 4=least important)

- Student body
- Academic challenge
- Faculty-student interaction
- Urban location

Ranking can be a difficult task and asking respondents to rank more than five items may lead to arbitrary rankings.

Open Questions do not limit the kind of answer respondents can give. They are designed to invite them to share information freely and cannot be answered simply with Yes or No. Open questions can help us learn not only what people are doing, but also why, and what they are thinking and feeling. They typically take more thought and time to answer, and thus place a larger “response burden” on those being surveyed. While open questions can yield rich and descriptive data, they are also more difficult and time consuming to analyze. Therefore, it is best to use them sparingly, and to focus on information that cannot be obtained using other question formats.

If you were asked to describe this institution to someone who had never heard of it, what would you tell them?

Describe how you made the decision to attend this institution.

If you were able to make changes in your academic experience here, what would you change and why?

Other prompts for open questions include providing a “critical incident” for response, or asking the respondent to describe a “typical” or an “ideal” day, week, program, class, etc.

Surveys should be designed to minimize response set bias, which occurs when respondents do not consider each question, and instead reply to all questions with the same response option. Although some researchers suggest doing this by reversing the direction of the response options, e.g., switching negative to positive or positive to negative for some questions, others believe you should consistently run the scales in one direction, and that variation in the questions and response options is sufficient.

Consider the order of questions, since preceding items can influence the response to subsequent questions.

Researchers typically place sensitive background items at the end of the survey, and often create categories when respondents may not be willing to disclose precise information, e.g., income.

Because respondents may abandon the survey before completing it, items nearer the end may have lower response rates. Consider this in ordering questions or administer surveys with different forms in order to minimize the order/response bias.

Adapted, in part, from Jennifer C. Greene, HSS690, Cornell University, Fall 1991.