

# Questionnaire Design Clinic

*Spring 2008 Seminar Series*

*Survey Research Laboratory  
University of Illinois  
[www.srl.uic.edu](http://www.srl.uic.edu)*

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## Cognitive Steps in Answering Questions

1. **Understand** question.
2. **Search** memory for information.
3. **Integrate** information into summary judgment.
4. **Translate** judgment onto response alternatives.

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## ***Survey Intro/Cover Letter***

### **Introduction should indicate:**

- who is conducting the survey
- the topics to be covered in the survey
- an assurance of confidentiality
- any IRB stipulations
- whether you offer how long it will take depends on mode, topic, population

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## ***Ordering the Questions***

- Put demographic questions at the end
- Leave objectionable questions (e.g., income) for the end
- First questions should be directly related to the topic as described in the introduction or advance/cover letter

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## Characteristics of a good question

- **One that yields a truthful, accurate answer**
- One that asks for one answer on one dimension
- One that accommodates all possible contingencies of response
- One that uses specific, simple language
- One that produces variability in response
- One that minimizes social desirability
- One that is pretested

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**Form A (agree I's version):**  
Individuals are more to blame than social conditions for crime and lawlessness in this country.

**Form B (agree SCs version):**  
Social conditions are more to blame than individuals for crime and lawlessness in this country.

**Form A (Agree I's)**

Agree (I): **59.6%**

Disagree (SC): **40.4**  
**100**  
**(473)**

**Form B (Agree SCs)**

Agree (SC): **56.8%**

Disagree (I): **43.2**  
**100**  
**(472)**

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## Characteristics of a good question

- **Specify who, what, when, where and how.**
- **Over what period of time? What's included?**
- **Provide cues**

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## Open vs. Closed Questions

Closed questions are *usually* better

- Easier for the respondent
- Less coding later
- Better to have respondent do categorizing
- Categories help define the question

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## Disadvantages of Closed Questions

Categories may be leading to respondents

May make it too easy to answer without thinking

May limit spontaneity

Not best when

- asking for frequency of sensitive behaviors
- there are numerous possible responses
  - role of initial question development and pretesting

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## Response Options

- Response categories should be consistent with the question
- Categories should typically be *exhaustive*, including every possible answer
- Categories should be mutually exclusive

- 5-7 response options
- Using graphic images for complex ratings is effective
- General guidelines
  - number of scale points (sensitivity vs. meaning)
  - labeling of scale points

## Physical Format Checklist

- Number all questions sequentially
- Use large, clear type; don't crowd
- 'White space:' Place more blank space between questions than between subcomponents of questions
- List answer categories vertically instead of horizontally
- Avoid double/triple 'banking' of response choices
- Be consistent with direction of response categories
- Be consistent with placement of response categories

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## Physical Format Checklist (continued)

- Don't split questions across pages. If necessary (e.g., question requires 1.5 pages), restate question and response categories on next page
- Put special instructions on questionnaire as needed, next to question
- Distinguish directions from questions - be consistent

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## Key References To Get Started

Dillman, Don. *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. New York: John, Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1999.

Bradburn, N, Sudman, S. and Wansink, B. *Asking Questions: The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire design - for Market Research, Political Polls, and Social and Health Questionnaires*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004.

*See also past issues of Public Opinion Quarterly*

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## Other References

Schuman, H., & Presser, S. (1981). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys*. New York: Academic Press.

Krosnick, J.A., Holbrook, A. L., Berent, M. K., Carson, R. T., Hanemann, W. M., Kopp, R. J., Mitchell, R. C., et al. (2002). The impact of "No Opinion" response options on data quality: Non-attitude reduction or an invitation to satisfice? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66, 371-403.

Saris, W. E., Krosnick, J. A., & Schaeffer, E. M. (2005). Comparing questions with agree/disagree response options to questions with construct-specific response options. Unpublished manuscript, Political, Social, Cultural Sciences, University of Amsterdam.

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