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.
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

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
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

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

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
Closed questions are *usually* better

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

**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
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

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
Key References To Get Started


See also past issues of *Public Opinion Quarterly*

Other References

