

# Surveys and Question Writing

## Evaluation webinar handout

### Introduction

- This handout relates to the 'Surveys and Question Writing' webinar and covers the following:
  - A brief overview of questionnaires
  - Points to consider when writing questions
  - The rules of question writing
  - Tips on how to spot any issues with your questions
  - Benefits of testing your questions in a pilot study
  - Open ended and closed ended questions

### Questionnaires and Surveys

- Questionnaires tend to consist of closed ended questions. Respondents typically answer these questions by ticking an answer from a pre-defined list of answer options. However, questionnaires can also include some open ended questions with free text boxes for responses.
- Questionnaires are generally self-completed by the respondent and are typically delivered online or by paper.
- However, not all questionnaires are self-completed. Some are interviewer led, and can take place face-to-face or over the phone.

### Strengths of Questionnaires

- Questionnaires are quick, simple and relatively cheap to administer.
- Closed ended questions provide data that is easy to collect and analyse.
- Questionnaires can collect the views of a large number and range of participants.

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### Weaknesses of Questionnaires

- Closed ended questions can restrict response categories and limit the depth of evaluation.
- Questionnaires sometimes have low response rates because they are perceived as boring.
- If you use lots of open ended questions much more time will be needed to analyse the results.

### How do I recruit people?

- If you have decided that you would like to conduct a questionnaire for your evaluation, the next step is to consider how you are going to recruit those who you would like to complete your survey.
- This might be relatively simple for education interventions such as training workshops, but it can be much more difficult to access the target audience of a publicity campaign.
- Once you have access to those you would like to take part, it is important to encourage them to respond to your questionnaire, as not everyone will want to take part.
- There are a number of tips you can follow to encourage people to take part:
  - Let respondents know what to expect through the use of some introductory information at the beginning of the survey.
  - Send a friendly reminder to those who don't get back to you.
- If you are sending a postal questionnaire:
  - Include a stamped addressed return envelope.
  - Use coloured ink.
  - Send it first class.
  - Send using recorded delivery.
  - If you send a reminder- include another copy of the survey!

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## Ethics

- It is also important to consider ethics, and it is ideal to think about any possible ethical implications of your proposed methodology and research design while you are planning your evaluation.
- You will need to consider:
  - **Informed consent**- it is vital to get agreement from a person before you begin to collect data. You should encourage people participate, but this must be their own decision and you should not make people feel like that they have to take part.
  - **Confidentiality**- where possible, all data about a person should be kept confidential and anonymous. Confidentiality means that you agree not to pass information about participants onto anyone outside of the research team.
  - **The right to withdraw**- respondents should be informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any point without feeling pressurised not to, and they should be made aware that they are not required to give a reason why they no longer want to participate in your evaluation project.
  - **The ethical implications of incentives**- incentives should not be so generous that they pressurise people to take part, and they should be independent rather than a benefit in kind.

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### Question Writing

- There are three main things to consider when writing questions:
  - Will the respondent understand the question and the answer options you provide?
  - Will the respondent be willing to answer your question?
  - Will the respondent be able to answer your question?
- The most important thing to remember is that the questions you ask should aim to collect data that will determine whether you have met your aims and objectives.

### The Rules of Question Writing

#### Question Writing Don'ts

- **Avoid long questions**- as a rule of thumb; keep any question under 25 words. Long questions can be off-putting!
- **Avoid asking two questions in one**- e.g. 'rate the content and delivery of the workshop'.
- **Avoid jargon terms and acronyms**- which can be hard to understand.
- **Avoid leading questions**- as this will introduce bias into your data.
- **Avoid using two negatives in a question**- e.g. 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *I would never not wear a seatbelt*'.
- **Avoid surplus questions**- ask yourself, do I need the answer to this question, or is it just nice to know?

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**Question Writing Dos**

- **Make sure everyone will understand the question in the same way**- avoid terms such as 'recently', which could mean different things to different people.
- **Offer a 'don't know' option**- for respondents who genuinely don't know.
- **Offer a 'prefer not to say' option**- this should not be combined with 'don't know' when analysing the results.
- **Place open ended questions towards the end of the questionnaire**- and leave just enough room for the respondent to answer. If the space to answer is too big the respondent might feel put off.
- **Be specific about what you are asking**- this will produce more useful data.
- **Leave some space for further comments**- the respondent will then know that you care about their views, and they might also provide useful information that you had not covered in your questionnaire.
- **Pre test your questions**- on a small group to find out if there are any problems with the questions you are asking.
- **Think about analysis**- do you have the time to analyse the data that the question will produce?

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### Spotting Problems with your Questions

- Here are some tips for spotting problems with the questions you have written:
  - Check them against the checklist at the end of this handout!
  - Read the question aloud to yourself. If it does not read well, consider turning it into two questions or re-phrasing it.
  - Ask yourself the question- how would I reply?
  
- There are also a number of things to look out for in the pre-test stage:
  - Questions that are often left unanswered or have several 'don't know' responses.
  - Open ended questions that have been misinterpreted.
  - People answering the wrong questions due to unclear skip patterns.
  - A cluttered look to your survey.
  - Respondents taking longer to complete the survey than you anticipated.

## Closed Ended Questions

- Any question with a list of answer options pre-determined by the researcher.

### Advantages

- Quick and easy to complete for the respondent, meaning the response rate is likely to be higher.
- The data these questions produce can be quickly analysed and easily compared to other responses.

### Disadvantages

- The respondent is limited to a small list of answer options, meaning there might not be an answer that reflects their views. This can be tackled by offering an 'other' answer option to allow the respondent to express their views.
- The respondent can just tick an answer without really thinking.
- The answers are often superficial- the responses cannot capture why someone feels the way they do.

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## Open Ended Questions

- Any question where a respondent answers in their own words.

### Advantages

- Respondents can elaborate on their answers, meaning this type of question is suitable for research on more complex issues.
- These kinds of questions can also be used if you are not an 'expert' on the subject matter, as you do not need to 'know' all of the answers and provide options for the respondent to tick.
- These questions can also identify questions for further surveys.

### Disadvantages

- As responses to these questions are all different, they are harder to analyse.
- Respondents will need to put more thought and time into their answers, which may put them off taking part.

## Summary

- This handout has covered:
  - A brief overview of questionnaires
  - Points to consider when writing questions
  - The rules of question writing
  - Tips on how to spot any issues with your questions
  - Benefits of testing your questions in a pilot study
  - Open ended and closed ended questions

## Contact details

If you have any further questions about the evaluation process, please email: [rneedham@rospa.com](mailto:rneedham@rospa.com)

For more support choosing existing questions, and for writing your own questions for your evaluation project, visit our online question bank.



## Question Writing Checklist

Question Writing Rule	
Is my question under 25 words long?	
Have I avoided asking two questions in one?	
Have I removed any avoidable jargon terms and acronyms?	
Have I made sure that my question will not lead respondents to answer in a particular way?	
Have I avoided using two negatives in one question?	
Have I made sure that my question is essential?	
Have I made sure that everyone will understand the question in the same way? E.g. avoiding vague terms	
Have I offered a 'don't know' option? (if applicable)	
Have I offered a 'prefer not to say' option? (if applicable)	
Have I placed any open ended questions at the end of my questionnaire?	
Have I been specific in what I am asking?	
Have I offered a chance for respondents to add any further comments?	
Have I pre-tested my questions?	
Will I be able to analyse the data this question will provide?	