PREPARING QUESTONNAIRES THAT WORK!

Writing effective questions

Question wording is one of the most important parts of designing a questionnaire and considerable attention should be paid to developing clear and useful questions.

- ☺ Use simple language and avoid jargon
- ☺ Make the question specific and simple and ask only one question at a time. Replace long, multi-part questions with short, direct ones.
- ☺ Ensure that instructions, questions and answer options are clear and unambiguous
- ☺ Remember to ask enough categorical questions that may be important in the data analysis (e.g. age, sex, postcode etc.)
- ☺ Consider how you will analyse the data when writing the questionnaire; closed questions are the easiest to analyse statistically.
- ☺ Do not make the questionnaire too long as this increases the amount of time to collect and analyse the data, and will deter some people from responding.

Some things to avoid

- ☹ Leading questions - Try to make sure that the respondent can give any answer without feeling they are giving the wrong answer. 'Do you support the unfair cuts to our school budget?' is an example of a leading question.
- ☹ Unnecessary or off-topic questions - Never seek information that isn't essential to your research objective. Avoid being nosey, or asking about things you are just interested to know. If in doubt, leave it out.
- ☹ Double-barrelled or multiple questions e.g. what do you feel about the situation of drug taking amongst young people compared to that of five years ago? The solution here is to break it down into a series of simple questions.
- ☹ Ambiguous questions For example 'drug taking' could be interpreted in many ways – after all coffee and aspirins are drugs therefore distinguish between different types of drug taking e.g. illegal drug taking, alcohol, underage drinking etc
- ☹ Negative questions, questions which use 'not', can be difficult to understand – especially when asking people to indicate whether they agree or disagree. For example 'Do you agree that people in prison should not be allowed to vote?'

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Questionnaire layout

Self-completed questionnaires need to be clearly and attractively laid-out with clear details of where to return them to (usually with a stamped addressed envelope)

✓ Make sure the layout is very clear and the typeset large enough to read clearly.
✓ Leave enough space in the questionnaire for the answers.
✓ Give clear instructions throughout the questionnaire for interviewers or respondents.
✓ Use filter questions to save respondents reading questions that are not relevant to them and guide people with boxes and arrows.
   "Look at the questionnaire and ask yourself: would I want to fill this in?"

Order of the questions

Questions should come in a logical order.

✓ Start with questions that it will be easy for people to answer (e.g. factual questions, questions relevant to everyone filling in the survey) and keep more difficult / sensitive questions for later
✓ Group questions into sections
✓ Use a variety of formats to keep people interested
✓ Finish with the demographic questions (e.g. age, where people live).

Piloting the questionnaire

Once the questionnaire has been developed it should be piloted. This means testing the questionnaire out with people similar to the group for which it has been written and identifying any problems with the structure or wording of the questions.

Some important questions to ask yourself after piloting the questionnaire:

• Did the answers give you information you can use? If not, are you asking the right questions?
• Do you need to know the answer to each question? Does each question give you different and useful information? If not, could you leave it out?
• Did people answer in unexpected ways? Are you questions clear and simple to understand? Could people have been confused?
• Are there some questions that people did not answer or found difficult to answer? Do you need to add other options to your closed questions? Were there areas where people wanted to say more?
• Were you able to analyse the answers? Do you need more closed questions – to make recording and analysing easier? Or do you need to include open questions where people can give reasons or explain their views in their own words?

When the time scale is short it is common for people to skip over the piloting stage. It is not worth taking this risk. If you pilot the questionnaire well you will notice any limitations or problems and be able to fix them before you waste time carrying out a survey that doesn't give you the information you need.