

Tips for Writing Questionnaire Items

Office of Educational Assessment

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This handout is provided by the UW Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) as a resource for WebQ workshop attendees who want some basic tips for writing questionnaire items. It does not address broader aspects of survey and research design, but additional resources can be found on our web site: <http://www.washington.edu/oea>. OEA also provides a variety of consulting and research support services; please feel free to contact us if you are interested in assistance with a research, assessment, or evaluation project (baytam@u.washington.edu, 206-543-5190).

TIP 1: BE RELEVANT

Before starting your survey, you should specify one or several over-arching questions you wish to address (i.e., research questions or evaluation questions). Your questionnaire items should be focused around these questions.

Different Domains of Questions: Behavior, Beliefs, and Evaluation

Does providing optional, online practice quizzes help students learn the material in my course?

Behavior	Of the ten optional online practice quizzes, how many did you complete?	0	1-2	3-5	6-7	8-9	10
Beliefs	Completing the online practice quizzes helped me learn the material in this course.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Evaluation	How satisfied were you with the online quizzes?	Extremely Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied		Somewhat Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied	

The three items above have different foci. The first could help answer your research question if you were able to correlate responses to the item with actual grades.

Different Types of Questions: Open- and Closed-Ended

How do transfer students benefit from going to “Transfer Thursday” sessions in the Gateway center?

Closed-ended: Which of the following do you see as benefits of attending Transfer Thursday sessions? (check all that apply)

- Learning about major requirements
- Meeting with a UW adviser
- Meeting other transfer students
- Other (specify): _____

Open-ended: What do you see as the benefits of attending Transfer Thursday sessions?

Data from an open-ended question can help you create “check all that apply” lists or other closed-format items. The primary drawback of open-ended questions is the time it takes to analyze the data; if resources are limited, use open-ended questions sparingly.

TIP 2: BE SPECIFIC

Avoid abstract terms and jargon

BAD	The in-class activities in this class facilitate active learning.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
GOOD	The in-class activities (e.g., illusory correlation demonstration, eye-witness testimony activity) help keep me engaged in class.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

In the revision, the terms “in-class activities” and “active learning” have been specified.

Provide clarifying details

BAD	How many times did you visit CLUE?	Write out acronyms or abbreviations the first time. Provide further descriptors if appropriate.
GOOD	How many times did you visit the Center for Learning and Undergraduate Enrichment (CLUE) -- evening tutoring in Mary Gates Hall?	

Frequency estimates

BAD	How many times do you visit CLUE?	Never	Not often	Fairly Often	All the time	
GOOD	During a typical quarter, how many times do you visit CLUE?	Never	1-3 times	About every other week	About once per week	2 or more times per week

The less definite the response options, the more 'noise' or error in the data (i.e., participants will vary in their interpretation of the options).

TIP 3: AVOID CONFUSION

Avoid double-barreled questions

BAD	The TAs in this course were helpful and responsive.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
GOOD	Rate the performance of the TAs on the following dimensions.					
	Helping you understand the material	Poor 1	2	3	4	Excellent 5
	Responding to inquires about your grade	Poor 1	2	3	4	Excellent 5

Avoid double-negative wording

BAD	The instructor for this course did not respond to students' comments during class.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
GOOD	The instructor for this course was response to students' comments during class.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

In the first case, students who thought the instructor was responsive (a positive trait) would have to choose strongly disagree (a negative answer). Watch out for such mental puzzles.

TIP 4: USE APPROPRIATE SCALES

Provide a spectrum of options

BAD	Did you enjoy the interactive online activity about Newton's 3rd Law?	No	Yes		
GOOD	To what extent did you enjoy the interactive online activity about Newton's 3rd Law?	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very much

Typical scales

Agreement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Satisfaction	Extremely Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied
Evaluation	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent	
	Very unfair	Unfair	Fair	Very fair		
	Not at all important	Not too important	Somewhat important	Very important		
Knowledge	Not at all familiar	Not too familiar	Somewhat familiar	Very familiar		

Unipolar vs. Bipolar scales

Unipolar	None	Some	Very	Extremely		
Bipolar	Extremely negative	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Somewhat positive	Very positive	Extremely positive

Often, the presence of one attribute does not necessitate the absence of another. For example, one can enjoy both arts and sciences, so they should not be presented with a scale that forces them to choose one or the other. Beware of imposing a structure or model that may not be valid.

Providing a (neutral) midpoint

With midpoint	Extremely negative	Very negative	Neither negative nor positive		Very positive	Extremely positive
Without midpoint	Extremely negative	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Somewhat positive	Very positive	Extremely positive

Opinions vary regarding the appropriateness or usefulness of a midpoint, particularly for agreement scales. Research suggests a forced response will yield roughly the same proportion of agree/disagree as a scale with a midpoint. For example:

Results with a midpoint: 30% con, 50% neutral, 20% pro
 Results without a midpoint: 60% con, 40% pro

Number of response anchors

Should one label all of the response options? In general, the more specific you are about the response options, the less you will have to worry about idiosyncratic interpretations of those options by the respondents. In some instances (e.g., frequency estimates) it is imperative that you label all options. In other cases, you could increase error by trying to 'force' a label. Whatever system you choose, make sure that your labeling is symmetrical (e.g., do not label only "1" and "2" and "5" on a 5-point scale).

N/A: Use sparingly!

NO	I would have completed the online practice quizzes, even if they did not count towards my grade.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
OK	The optional online practice quizzes improved my grade on the midterm.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A

Another alternative would be to direct respondents to skip a set of items if they had not completed any of the optional online practice questions, making the N/A option unnecessary.

"Not applicable" and "don't know" should be avoided for opinion and attitude items.

"Check all that apply" lists

Make lists as exhaustive as possible. Use previously collected open-ended data if available. Unless all options are known, it is almost always appropriate to provide a space for a write-in "other" response.

TIP 5: AVOID BIAS

Avoid leading questions

BAD	The UW is considering having wireless capacity for the entire campus within 3 years. Given the potential impact on students' behavior in the classroom, what do you think of this proposal?
IFFY	How do you think all-campus wireless capacity will affect students' behavior in the classroom?
GOOD	How, if at all , do you think all-campus wireless capacity will affect students' behavior in the classroom?
BEST	Do you think all-campus wireless capacity will affect students' behavior in the classroom? <div style="text-align: center;"> Definitely not Possibly Definitely yes </div> If yes or possibly, in what ways do you think it will affect students' behavior?

In the first example, there is an implicit assumption that expanded capacity will affect students' behavior in class. The second wording is better, but it still does not make clear that respondents are free to deny any effect; the third wording provides that option. In the last example, the addition of a closed-format introductory question allows for easy tabulation of overall opinions from the open-ended question.

Beware hidden assumptions and contingencies

BAD	During the past quarter, how often have you skipped evening social events to study?
GOOD	In the course of a typical seven-day week, how many hours do you spend doing course-related work outside of class? In the course of a typical seven-day week, how many hours do you spend socializing with friends for non-academic purposes?

The overall question or objective is to find out how students in different majors balance their social lives and study time. The first example assumes that the respondent would normally take part in social events. Furthermore, there is an implication that all social events take place in the evening, that only evening social events 'count', or that respondents typically only study during the evening. Finally, the respondent would be obliged to think back and average over an entire quarter.

REFERENCES/RESOURCES

- Bradburn, N. M., Sudburn, S. & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions: The definitive guide to questionnaire design*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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