



**Guidelines for Writing an Effective Questionnaire—Article 2**

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The initial article in this series touched on four areas. Specifically:

1. The differences that exist when writing a questionnaire that respondents will fill out themselves as opposed to one in which a professional interviewer administers the questionnaire to the respondent.
2. Knowing which questions should be asked early on in the questionnaire, in the middle or toward the end.
3. Understanding how to phrase questions.
4. Being sensitive to questionnaire length.

But the perfect questionnaire will achieve nothing if you fail to get cooperation from potential respondents to sit still for the interview and/or if your questioning procedure is particularly burdensome. To secure respondent cooperation for an interview, the following steps will be helpful:

**Immediately address skepticism**

Unless they are lonely souls just waiting for the phone to ring or for a questionnaire to appear in their mailbox or on their computer screen most people are skeptical when asked to complete a research survey. The knee-jerk reaction is that someone is trying to sell them something.

In fact, one in three people who are contacted on the phone will immediately hang up the second they realize they are being asked to complete an interview. The percent that dismiss a mail or internet questionnaire is even higher. This means that at the outset fewer people are even available to be interviewed. As a result, your ending sample of respondents will be nothing but strange people with strange attitudes if you don't gain good cooperation from people who will give you a moment of time before they dismiss you.

To gain the cooperation of reliable respondents follow these guidelines:

- A. At the outset, assure the respondent that no attempt will be made to sell them anything as a result of their cooperation.
- B. Inform the respondents how long it should take to complete the questionnaire (e.g., “It should take you about 20 minutes to complete this interview or fill out the questionnaire”). Being honest up front is particularly important for longer questionnaires (more than 20 minutes), as respondents are more likely to terminate an interview if they feel they are being led on.
- C. If you don’t feel it will bias the interview, tell respondents who is sponsoring the study. While this is not always appropriate, cooperation rate will increase if respondents know that a legitimate company is seeking their opinion.

### Offer an Incentive

Potential respondents will be far more likely to give you their time if you offer of an incentive to them. While this isn’t usually necessary for shorter interviews, it can be essential for longer ones. Here are a few ideas for incentive offers:

- A. Tell respondents that if they complete the interview their name will be included in a drawing for a substantial prize (TV, computer, trip to Cancun, etc).
- B. Tell respondents that they would have an increased chance of winning if they complete the interview. Here the incentive might be a series of less expensive items (e.g., iPod minis, computer ink cartridges, etc.). Of course, you should follow through with your incentive promise.
- C. Offer to mail money for completion. Usually \$2 is adequate for shorter interviews on the phone, \$5 or \$10 is appropriate for longer phone interviews. For mail or internet questionnaires, offer to send the incentive upon completion or receipt of the interview.

The types of incentives that you could offer are limited only by your imagination and budget. It is important to remember that with perseverance you might eventually get a large enough sample of respondents for your study without an incentive. Equally important, though, is that your sample be representative. That means you should encourage the participation of respondents who would not otherwise be interested. That is only way to know if the opinions you are getting hold true for everyone—not just those who have a particularly positive or negative point-of- view.

To ask questions in an easy-flowing manner, try the following:

### Keep Questions as Short as Possible

Questions should be precise and to the point. They should not be wordy and verbose. Here are two examples:

Wordy Telephone Question:

“People shop up-scale stores like Neiman-Marcus, Nordstrom’s or Saks, regular stores like Macy’s or Sears and discount stores like Wal-Mart, Target and Costco. Please think now just about discount stores like Wal-Mart, Target and Costco. I am going to read you a list of statements regarding why people shop in these types of discount stores. After I read each question please tell me whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly with each statement. The first statement is: ‘*discount stores are enjoyable to shop.*’ Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat disagree somewhat or disagree strongly with the statement, *discount stores are enjoyable shop?* “

To the Point Telephone Question:

‘I am going to read a few statements about discount stores such as Wal-Mart, Target and Costco. Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly *that discount stores are enjoyable to shop?* ‘

### Use Easy Rating Scales

Respondents can become confused when rating scales become complex, especially when answering questions over the phone. Keep rating scales simple, not complex, for example:

Complex Scale:

Please rate the extent to which you agree that *shopping at discount stores is fun*. A 10 rating means you agreed strongly with the statement, a seven rating if you agreed somewhat with the statement, a five rating if you had no opinion, a three rating if you disagree somewhat with the statement and a one rating if you disagree strongly with the statement.

Simple Scale:

On a 10-point scale, where ten is agree strongly and one is disagree strongly, what number would you give to the statement *shopping at discount stores is fun?*

## Stay Consistent

Once the respondent is accustomed to one type of scale in your questionnaire, keep that scale throughout. Take the simple scale question above:

On a 10-point scale where ten is agree strongly and one is disagree strongly, what number would you give to the statement *shopping at discount stores is fun?*

Let's say that the respondent has rated a dozen or so general statements about shopping at discount stores on this 10-point scale. Now you have a series of questions concerning their attitude toward buying clothing at discount stores. You could phrase this question like this:

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly that *you get good quality women's clothing when shopping at discount stores?*

Or you could keep the scale consistent by asking the question like this:

On the same 10-point scale as we used before, where 10 is agree strongly and one is disagree strongly, what number would give the statement *you get good quality women's clothing when shopping at discount stores?*

The more you change the structure from one question to the next, the more likely respondents will be to think about the scales and less about what they are being asked. In instances where this is necessary to get the information you want, you'll have no choice but to change scales. But if it can be avoided, you should do so.

## Avoid Shades of Grey When Possible

Many questions can be answered by a simple "Yes or No." For example:

*Are you likely to shop at a discount store in the next two weeks?*

This question could also be asked:

*Are you very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not at all likely to shop at a discount store in the next two weeks?*

Since "Yes vs. No" or "Definitely Will vs. Definitely Will Not" can be easier than using shades of grey, ask yourself if the information you are posing lends itself to a simple black or white response.

In my article next month, I'll deal with another form of questionnaire. The way to construct a discussion guide when moderating a focus group

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