

Survey Design, Part 3

Decisions about Responses to the Question

(Adapted from a textbook by Selltiz, Wrightsman, and Cook)

Open-ended vs. Closed-ended questions

Closed-ended or fixed alternatives

For. ex. “How would you rate President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic?”

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Don’t know (do not read)

Open-ended response category

For. ex. “How would you describe President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic?”

(Record exactly)

One advantage of the closed-ended question is that the response are standardized and, therefore, easy to code.

One advantage of the open-ended question is that no pre-judgements are made about the possible array of answers a respondent might give to a question. (In other words, the possible responses are not limited to the ones listed in a closed-ended question.)

Another advantage of open-ended question is that survey researchers can see the language used by respondents.

In your surveys, almost all of your questions should be closed-ended.

Use of “Don’t know”

In all of your closed-ended questions, you should have a “Don’t know” response (see above example.)

The only decision you have to make it, if the survey were to be conducted over the phone, is whether to verbalize this response. In other words, if you decided not to verbalize the response, you would write instructions to the caller such as “Do not read.” (See again this example.)

For. ex. “How would you rate President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic?”

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Don’t know (do not read)

On the other hand, if you believed that there was a good chance a respondent **might not** have an opinion about a given topic, you would omit the instructions to the caller “Do not read.” (See below.)

For. ex. “How would you rate President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic?”

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Don’t know

Use of Matrix Questions

Now I’m going to read you a list of political figures. For each name I read, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion. If you do not know enough about a person, please say so.

Person	Very Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Somewhat Unfav.	Very Unfav.	Don't Know
Person 1					
Person 2					
Person 3					
Person 4					
Person 5					
Person 6					
Person 7					
Person 8					

This type of matrix question is a convenient way of obtaining a lot of data without having to repeat the response categories to the individuals being interviewed each time.

It is also a good way to isolate out those respondents who do not have an opinion from those that do. This way you learn two things: 1) the degree of name recognition of candidates and 2) among individuals who have an opinion, how favorably they are disposed to the candidate

This matrix type of question can be used for all sorts of data gathering.

For ex. – asking students how favorable they are towards certain support services at Hunter.

For ex. – how often Hunter students participate in a list of activities.

For ex. – asking the degree of agreement/disagreement with a list of policy statements.

Some other topics related to survey design

1. In general, you should ask demographic questions at the end of a survey after you have built up a rapport with respondents.

2. Contingency questions:

For. ex.

Question 10. "Have you eaten in the Hunter cafeteria this semester?"

Yes (continue to Question 11)

No (skip to Question 12)

Don't know (skip to Question 12)

Question 11. "Overall, how would you rate the quality of the food in the Hunter cafeteria?"

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Don't know

Question 12. "Have you attended any sporting events at Hunter?"

Yes

No

Don't know

3. Give directions to caller or person being interviewed.

Sometimes this is done in parentheses as illustrated above.