

Examples of question wording

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2010

1. What do you expect the difference to be in answer frequencies?

- when asked what they consider “the most important thing for children to prepare them for live” x% of a representative sample chose the alternative “to think for themselves” when this alternative was offered on a list.
- y% volunteered an answer that could be assigned to this category when no list was presented.

Offering answering options might drastically change the results: 62% of a the sample chose the alternative “to think for themselves” when this alternative was offered on a list. yet, only 5% volunteered an answer that could be assigned to this category when no list was presented.

Use e.g. interview sessions and other sources (literature, studies) to collect a thorough insight in possible answers, before working out the answering options in closed questions.

2. What do you expect the difference to be in answer frequencies?

- when asked how successful they have been in life, x% of a representative sample reported a value between 0 and 5 when the numeric values of the rating scale ranged from 0 to 10 (not at all successful to extremely successful)
- y% reported a formally equivalent value between –5 and 0 on a scale ranging from –5 to +5 (not at all successful to extremely successful)

Choice in scale can make a difference, and values below 0 do have a different ‘connotation’. Consider the audience – will respondents feel comfortable using a scale that ranges from negative values on the scale to positive values (-5 to +5)? 34% of a representative sample reported a value between 0 and 5 when the numeric values of the rating scale ranged from 0 to 10 (not at all successful to extremely successful), whereas only 13% reported a formally equivalent value between –5 and 0 on a scale ranging from –5 to +5 (not at all successful to extremely successful)

3. What range would you choose?

A questionnaire asking psychosomatic patients about their situation will contain an item about frequency of physical symptoms experienced; which response scale would you adopt, and why? (pick your choice of ranges, anywhere from several times per minute to once every twelve years, or other ranges in between)

- when asked how often they experience a variety of physical symptoms, 62% of a sample of psychosomatic patients reported symptom frequencies of more than twice a month when the response scale ranged from “twice a month or less” to “several times a day”
- yet, only 39% reported frequencies of more than twice a month when the scale ranged from “never” to “more than twice a month”

Depending on the response scale provided, respondents will use this as a framework to provide their answer – since most respondents will not have a precise “counter” of how often they experience something, they will compare their own estimation of the frequency (which could be e.g. very frequently – so should fit with one extreme on the scale – to rarely, which should fit with the other end of the scale) with the range that is provided in the answer options. See also next example.

4. What do you expect the differences in response style to be in the following cases:

- How frequently have you been angry [last week]
- How frequently have you been angry [last year]?

Respondents tend to infer that the researcher will be interested in more frequent and less severe incidents of anger when the question pertained to one week rather than one year.

5. Consider the following case:

Please answer the following questions about a student who allowed another student to cheat on an exam by copying his answers:

1. how honest is the first student (not at all – completely)
2. how kind is the first student (not at all – very)

Order in which the two questions will be asked, is going to have an impact on the answers; especially if one first asks whether or not the student is kind, the answer on the question about honesty is likely to be biased – someone who is kind, tends to be seen as more honest than a person who is judged to be less kind.

6. Consider the following case:

In questionnaire: can you please state what is your income?

Unclear question, that can result in difficult to process answers; what is meant? Monthly, yearly, pretax or after tax, et cetera? Make sure that it is absolutely clear what you are asking, and how you want it answered.

7. And the following one:

In the past three years, how many times have you made a gift to a non-profit organization?

This is going to be too demanding for the respondents – so respondents are going to construct an answer, which might result in something that seems precise, but that is in fact an estimation. (construct: I like the following charity organizations, I will on average donate a certain amount of money each year, so for the past three years that should be 3 times number of organizations that I like....; oh, and do I know what a non-profit organization is?)

8. Any suggestions how to ensure that respondents will not forget to include in their answer to the following question *all* cases that they drank beer in the past 30 days?

During the past 30 days, did you drink any beer?

Provide examples of situations where they might have had a beer:

People drink beer in many places – for example, at home, at restaurants, at bars, sporting events, at friends' homes, etc. During the past 30 days, did you drink any beer?

9. Consider the following case:

What percentage of your budget do you spend on CDs?

Similar to example 7, respondents will provide you with a seemingly accurate figure, but in fact will sort of construct the answer, based on estimations, rough calculations, etc. Basically, this type of question is too difficult to answer by respondents, and is almost certainly going to result in (very) inaccurate answers.

10. Consider the following items from a customer satisfaction questionnaire, handed out by Pizza Hut a couple of years ago:

How would you rate our service?

excellent / very good / acceptable / not acceptable

- unbalanced scale
- the 'our' service might bias respondents even more

Do you visit Pizza Hut:

- 1 or more times per week
- 1 or more times per month
- 1 or more times per year
- this is my first visit

Options are not fully mutually exclusive.

11. Consider the following cases:

- Most doctors say that cigarette smoke causes lung disease for those near a smoker; do you agree?
- Should the mayor spend even more tax money trying to keep the streets in top shape?
- What is the most important thing we should do to stop the economy from deteriorating any further?

Difficult to disagree with experts such as doctors....

The wording of the questions is in all cases biased, not neutral, and implying a certain viewpoint as more favorable than other viewpoints – this can easily lead the participant in a certain direction.

And the third question could be better rephrased as follows:

What is the most important thing a government can do to strengthen its economy?
(deteriorating is implying a certain viewpoint with which the respondent might not agree)

12. Consider the following cases:

Does your company have pension and health insurance benefits?

Do you like the texture and flavor of this snack?

Classic mistake: Two topics in one question – what if there are pension benefits but no health insurance benefits?

13. What would you advise a colleague who wants to include the following item in a questionnaire:

If a new electronics store were to open down the street, would you shop there?

Such hypothetical questions are very difficult for respondents to answer – they cannot predict what they will do in such cases, since not all factors that might affect their behavior in the future are known in the present. And it is without any consequences to say yes now.

14. Discuss the possible answers that the following question might elicit:

What have you done today?

If this would be an open question, so eliciting free response instead of providing answer categories, it will depend on the framing of the question in the context of the questionnaire how the respondent will answer; literal meaning versus pragmatic meaning – what is the researcher interested in, what are the researcher's intentions – every detail, or particular activities only?

15. Answer options should always include a 'do not know' or 'decline to answer' option:

Totally disagree / disagree/ disagree nor agree / agree / totally agree

Well, maybe not always, but do consider carefully whether or not such an answer option should be included. Respondents who feel they are being coerced into giving an answer they do not want to give often do not complete the questionnaire. For example, respondents might be inclined to abandon a questionnaire that asks them to specify their income, without offering a "decline to state" choice.

And in other cases, a 'do not know' option might be a very valid answer option!

16. Would there be any difference in asking about support for the death penalty in the following cases?

Do you support the death penalty:

- yes / no
- yes / no / life sentence without parole

Make sure that all the relevant alternatives are included as answer choices. Leaving out a choice can give misleading results. For example, a number of recent polls that ask Americans if they support the death penalty "Yes" or "No" have found 70-75% of the respondents choosing "Yes." Polls that offer the choice between the death penalty and life in prison without the possibility of parole show support for the death penalty at about 50-60%. Polls that offer the alternatives of the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole, with the inmates working in prison to pay restitution to their victims' families have found support for the death penalty closer to 30%.

So, the lowest figure is probably truest, since it represents the percentage that favor that option regardless of the alternatives offered. The need to include all relevant alternatives is not limited to political polls: anytime one leaves out alternatives, one could end up with misleading data.

17. Is this a good question?

Do you ever buy pasta?

No, too unspecific. Be as specific as possible. "Do you ever buy pasta?" can include someone who once bought some years ago. It does not tell you whether the pasta was dried, or fresh and may include someone who had pasta in a restaurant. It is better to say "Have you bought pasta (other than in a restaurant) in the last three months?" "If yes, was it fresh or dried?" Few people can remember what they bought more than three months ago unless it was a major purchase such as an automobile or appliance (and even then they might make mistakes with the time frame).

18. Is this a good question?

What do you think of the Republican XYZ proposal?

Avoid emotionally charged words or leading questions – adding ‘republican’ is likely to change the whole question for at least part of the respondents. You will get different answers from asking "What do you think of the XYZ proposal?" than from "What do you think of the Republican XYZ proposal?" The word "Republican" would cause some people to favor or oppose the proposal based on their feelings about Republicans, rather than about the proposal itself. It is very easy to create bias in a questionnaire. This is another good reason to test it before going ahead.

19. Consider the following case:

Do you use regular or premium gas in your car?

Check that closed questions provide a listing with all the possible answers. A question like "Do you use regular or premium gas in your car?" does not cover all possible answers. The owner may alternate between both types. The question also ignores the possibility of diesel or electric-powered cars. A better way of asking this question would be "Which type(s) of fuel do you use in your cars?" The responses allowed might be:

- Regular gasoline
- Premium gasoline
- Diesel
- Other
- Do not have a car

20. Consider the following case:

What do you think about product X?

- It's the best on the market
- It's about average
- It's the worst on the market

Carefully consider the range of answer options, making sure that a realistic set of options is provided. A question phrased like the one above will force most answers into the middle category, resulting in very little usable information.

21. Consider the following case:

How many hours per week do you spend on watching television?

Apart from the social bias – in certain situations respondents might feel uncomfortable to provide such information - such questions might also be very difficult to answer accurately – the amount of time might be very variable, and will certainly be unrecorded!

22. Consider the following case:

Do you approve or disapprove of changing from letter grades to a portfolio system of assessment?

Some (or perhaps many) people will answer without really understanding what this means. It doesn't help to give examples because people will probably respond only to the examples you give them. It is better to ask about attitudes only toward specific and clearly identified proposals.

23. Consider the following case:

In order to improve the quality of education, should teachers be paid higher salaries?

This is a typical example of a leading question, suggesting only one possible answer. This question presents a goal widely seen as important (improving the quality of education) accompanied by the assumption that the means suggested (raising teachers salaries) will accomplish the goal -- thus influencing the respondent to answer "Yes."

At a more complex level: what if someone actually believes that the quality of education in the schools he or she knows is high already, then what should that person answer? So, not well formulated question.

24. Compare the following cases:

How often do you miss classes on average?

How many classes did you miss last week?

When people are asked about their participation in generally approved activities such as attending classes, they tend to give socially acceptable answers that may or may not be true. You should only ask questions such as these when you understand their limitations and when you have a control to make the answers more meaningful. For example, if you ask students about their attendance in class, you might ask them how many regularly scheduled classes they missed last week for reasons other than illness.

25. Consider the following case:

- a. Under \$10,000 income
- b. \$10,000-\$15,000 income
- c. \$15,000-\$25,000 income
- d. \$25,000-\$40,000 income
- e. Over \$40,000 income

Not clear to respondents which answer to choose if they have an income of for example \$25,000!

26. From the Philips Research website pole:

How often do you use Google or comparable search engines to search for information you need for your work?

- Daily
- Sometimes
- Never

What would you like to change in the meeting room facilities in the Strip?

- Nothing, it is perfect
- More rooms
- Bigger rooms
- Better support
- I never use meeting rooms

Answer options are not 'equally spaced'

Answer options are not complete

27. From the NatLab RSI questionnaire in 2005:

Workload:

- None
- Little
- Much
- Very much

Not well balanced answer options, and what is workload?? Will everyone interpret this concept in the same way?

Bonus example: Effect of different filtering questions:

- standard open format:
 - the Iraqi leaders are basically trying to get along with America. Do you agree or disagree with this?
- quasi filter:
 - the Iraqi leaders are basically trying to get along with America. Do you agree, disagree or have no opinion on that?
- full filter:
 - Not everyone has an opinion on the following; if you do not have an opinion, just say so.
 - The Iraqi leaders are basically trying to get along with America. Do you have an opinion on that? (if yes): do you agree or disagree

% giving response	standard	quasi-filter	full filter
agree	48	28	23
disagree	38	30	21
no opinion	14	43	56