

# Session 2: Tips and tricks for developing survey questions



# General guidelines for developing survey questions

- Keep your research question(s) in mind
- Focus on exactly what you want to know
  - Be specific
    - If you're interested in the impact of children on disposable income, would you ask:
      - “How many children are living in your household?”
      - or
      - “How many children do you have?”
- Put yourself in the position of the respondent
  - How would you answer the question?
  - Be as simple as you can be with your questions



# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (1)

## Avoid ambiguous terms

- Even commonly used terms may be vague:
  - Example: what does “income” actually include?
- Example from 2023 ISSP:

“76) What was **your own total personal income** from all sources in 2022 before taxes and other deductions?

*Income from all sources (e.g. work income, interest or dividends, property income, rent, pensions, welfare support, money personally provided by somebody, etc.)”*

# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (2)

## Avoid long questions

- Example from the 2023 ISSP:

41) How often do you think that people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, and how often would they try to be fair?

- |  |                          |    |
|--|--------------------------|----|
| Try to take advantage almost <u>all</u> of the time..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1  |
| Try to take advantage most of the time.....              | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2  |
| Try to be fair most of the time..... <u>      </u>       | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3  |
| Try to be fair almost <u>all</u> of the time.....        | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4  |
| Can't choose.....  | <input type="checkbox"/> | -8 |

# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (3)

## Avoid double-barrelled questions

- Example from the 2023 ISSP:

“13) There are different opinions about immigrants from other countries living in Canada. (By “immigrants” we mean people who come to settle in Canada). How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

People born in Canada should be given preference over immigrants when it comes to jobs, housing, or health care.”

<b>Agree strongly</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree strongly</b>	<b>Can't choose</b>
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# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (4)

## Avoid very general questions

- Example: “How do you feel about democracy?”
- Example from the 2023 ISSP:

“21) On the whole, on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is very poorly and 10 is very well...

How well does democracy work in Canada today?”

# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (5)

## Avoid leading questions

- Example (1): “Should the Senate, which costs taxpayers millions of dollars each year, be abolished?”
- Example (2): “Should the Senate, which is essential to passing laws in Canada, be abolished?”
- Example (3): “Should the Senate be abolished?”

# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (6)

## Avoid questions that are actually two questions

- Example: “Which political party did you vote for in the last federal election?”
  - “Did you vote in the last federal election?”
  - (For those who answered “yes”): “Which political party did you vote for in the last federal election?”

Don't make assumptions about your respondents



# **Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (7)**

**Avoid questions that include negatives, especially double negatives**

Example: “Do you oppose the rule stating that there is no smoking on patios?”

# Specific guidelines for developing survey questions (8)

## Avoid technical terms

### Example from the 2023 ISSP:

9) Thinking in general about nations and countries all over the world, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

It would be best if every nation had its own country where it could make its own decisions.

- |                            |                          |    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| Agree strongly             | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1  |
| Agree                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2  |
| Neither agree nor disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3  |
| Disagree                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4  |
| Disagree strongly          | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5  |
| Can't choose               | <input type="checkbox"/> | -8 |

## **2. WORKSHOP GROUP ACTIVITY**

# Instructions

- Come to the front board and take your 5 survey questions back from earlier this morning, and work on improving each according to the guidelines we just discussed.
  - If you feel your survey questions are already good-quality, discuss and write down the justifications of why they are...
  - or keep writing more examples of good-quality survey questions.



# UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO



**Lunch Break**