

Session 3: Tips and tricks for developing survey answer options



General guidelines for developing survey answer options

- Think of the level of information you need, and the types of analyses you plan on conducting with the data, to determine what answer options to provide to the respondent for any given survey question.
- For example:
 - do you get your respondent to write in their personal income...
 - short-answer open-ended numerical question
 - which would lead to an interval-level variable for later statistical analyses
 - or do you get them to select their income group from a number of provided categories?
 - close-ended question
 - which would lead to an ordinal-level variable for later statistical analyses
- Gathering more information vs. ease of answering the question

Specific guidelines for developing open-ended questions

- Usually use short-answer open-ended questions in surveys
 - Especially if answer is a number (income in dollars, age in years, etc.)
- Can use long-answer open-ended questions in surveys, but things to consider before doing so:
 - Do you have the resources (time and human power) to analyze all the qualitative (text) information that may be gathered from hundreds or thousands of answers to a long-answer open-ended survey question?
 - Long-answer open-ended questions take much longer and usually more brainpower and writing skills on behalf of the respondent
 - Usually leads to non-response bias
- Have seen a trend of including one long-answer open-ended question at the end of the survey for feedback or more information that the respondent thinks is important to include

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (1)

- For multiple-choice questions (most common type of survey question), make sure your answer categories that respondents can choose from are exhaustive...
- and mutually exclusive (if only one category can be selected)
- Example from 2023 ISSP:

67) Apart from special occasions such as weddings, funerals, etc., how often do you attend religious services on average?

- 1 Several times a week or more often
- 2 About once a week
- 3 2 or 3 times a month
- 4 About once a month
- 5 Several times a year
- 6 About once a year
- 7 Less frequently than once a year
- 8 Never

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (2)

- Ensure symmetry between a closed question and its answer options
 - Avoid: ‘How satisfied are you with your student experience? Very good, good, poor, very poor.’
 - Instead: “Very satisfied, satisfied, not satisfied, not at all satisfied.”

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (3)

- Ensure the answer options are balanced
 - Avoid: “Excellent, very good, good, satisfactory, poor.”
 - Instead: “Very good, good, poor, very poor.”

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (4)

- With most survey modes, you have the option of randomizing the order in which the respondent is presented with answer categories for a survey question.
- Example in the 2023 ISSP: the order of political parties is randomized for the following question:

70) Thinking back to the last Canadian federal election in September 2021, which party did you vote for?

Filter: Ask if question 69) = 1 or no answer (respondent voted in the most recent federal election or did not answer)

Randomize ordering of categories 1-6 when presented to respondent

- 1 Liberal Party
 - 2 Conservative Party
 - 3 NDP (New Democratic Party)
 - 4 Bloc Québécois
 - 5 Green Party
 - 6 People's Party
 - 7 Other. Please specify:
 - 96 I cast an invalid ballot
- 9 No answer
-4 NAP

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (5)

- How many categories to include in an ordinal-level scale?
- 4-point scale?
 - 1) Strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) disagree; 4) strongly disagree
- 5-point Likert scale?
 - 1) Strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) neither agree nor disagree; 4) disagree; 5) strongly disagree
- 7-point scale?
 - 1) Very strongly agree; 2) strongly agree; 3) agree; 4) neither agree nor disagree; 5) disagree, 6) strongly disagree; 7) very strongly disagree
- Or more?

Specific guidelines for developing close-ended questions (6)

- When to include the following answer options:
 - “Don’t know”
 - “Can’t choose”
 - “Refuse to answer”
 - “Prefer not to answer”
 - Etc.

Some questions need a lot of extra thought and caution when it comes to their answer options...

▪ Example (1) from 2023 ISSP:

1) What was your sex at birth?

- 1 Male
- 2 Female

2) What is your gender? Please select all that apply.

- 1 Woman (includes cis women, trans women, and everyone else who identifies as a woman)
- 2 Man (includes cis men, trans men, and anyone else who identifies as a man)
- 3 Gender non-conforming
- 4 Agender
- 5 Questioning
- 6 Trans
- 7 Two-spirit
- 8 Non-binary
- 9 Another gender (please specify): _____
- 10 I prefer not to answer

Some questions need a lot of extra thought and caution when it comes to their answer options...

▪ Example (2) from 2023 ISSP:

71) Please indicate which of the following group(s) you consider yourself to belong to.

Please select one or two groups only.

Respondent can select up to 2 options here.

- 1 Black (for example, African, Black North American, Caribbean)
- 2 East Asian (for example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean)
- 3 Indigenous (for example, First Nations, Inuit, Métis)
- 4 Latin American (for example, Argentinian, Brazilian, Chilean, Colombian, Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Mexican, Salvadorian, Venezuelan)
- 5 Middle Eastern (for example, Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Lebanese, Palestinian, Saudi Arabian, Syrian, Turkish)
- 6 South Asian (for example, West and East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
- 7 Southeast Asian (for example, Cambodian, Filipino, Laotian, Malaysian, Vietnamese)
- 8 White (for example, White European, White North American, White Oceanic)
- 9 Other. Please specify: _____

3. WORKSHOP GROUP ACTIVITY

Instructions

- Look at the answer options you provided for your survey questions from earlier this morning. How could they be improved? How could they be changed for different needs?

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Afternoon Break