

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are the most widely used method of data collection. Despite them being very popular, it is easy to administer questionnaires that give misleading or worthless results. Good questionnaires require thought and effort.

Steps in using a questionnaire

Developing the instrument- this is the questionnaire that is used to collect data. The respondents read through the questions themselves and mark the answers. The researcher develops the questions based on various variables that he/she would like to find out. The questions are thought through over and over again to refine and organize them in a manner that will ease data collection and analysis.

Principles of good Question writing

A good questionnaire forms an integrated whole. You should weave your questions together so that they flow smoothly. Include introductory remarks and instructions for clarification. Measure each variable with one or more survey questions.

1. Avoid confusion and keep the respondents' perspective in mind. Good questionnaires will give you reliable and valid responses. They also help the respondent feel that they have understood the question and that their answers are meaningful.
2. Take care if the respondents are heterogeneous or if they come from circumstances different from your own. People will respond differently to the same question depending on their different backgrounds.
3. Question writing is more of an art than a science. It takes skill, practice, patience and creativity.

10 things to avoid when writing your questions

1. Avoid jargon, slang and abbreviations
2. Avoid ambiguity, confusion and vagueness.
3. Avoid emotional language and prestige bias.
4. Avoid double-barreled questions. A double-barreled question consists of two or more questions joined together e.g. does this company have pension and health insurance benefits?
5. Avoid leading questions. A leading question is one that leads the respondent to choose one response over another by its wording e.g. you don't smoke do you?
6. Avoid asking questions that are beyond respondents capabilities
7. Avoid false premises- i.e. beginning with a statement which is clearly not true.
8. Avoid asking about future intentions, if it is not relevant to the context of the questionnaire
9. Avoid double negatives. Double negatives are grammatically in correct and confusing words
10. Avoid overlapping or unbalanced response categories. Make response categories mutually exclusive, exhaustive and balanced. *Mutually exclusive* categories should be scales that do not overlap e.g. 5-10, 10-20, etc. *Exhaustive* means every respondent has a choice. E.g. when you ask, "Are you employed or unemployed",

the people who are self employed may not have an easy choice to make. Balanced means giving choice on both ends. An unbalanced question would be- "how can you rate the performance of your supervisor"- outstanding, excellent, very good or satisfactory.

Types of Questions and response categories

a) Threatening vs. Non threatening questions

Threatening questions are those that researchers may ask, but that respondents may find sensitive. E.g. questions about social behaviour, drugs or alcohol. The responses may be affected by the *social desirability bias*, since the respondent may want to portray a false picture that they feel is socially desirable.

These biases can be minimized if researchers guarantee to the respondents confidentiality and explain the importance of giving truthful answers.

b) Skip or contingency questions

These are questions that give the respondent an opportunity to skip responding to questions that irrelevant to them. On the basis of an answer to first question, the respondent may skip or answer the following questions.

c) Open vs. closed questions

Open question is a free response question, giving the respondent an opportunity to give a wide range of responses while closed questions require brief and straightforward responses.

Advantages of questionnaires (from previous class discussions)

1. Requires less personnel to administer
2. Specific- Asks for specific questions
3. Easy to analyze
4. Can be replicated/reliable
5. Easy to administer
6. Non-intimidating

Disadvantages of questionnaires (from previous class discussions)

1. Understanding questionnaires can be barrier especially where the respondents are illiterate
2. Requires more and time
3. May solicit false/ biased responses
4. Pre-testing may not be feasible
5. Can be subject to misuse
6. Difficulty in designing questions

Reference: W. L. Neuman- Social Research Methods- Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches