

Tips & Tools #2: Creating Interview Questions



Writing Questions

To get the respondent's perspective in detail and in his or her own words, ask questions that can't be answered yes or no. Try to avoid questions that lead to one word responses.

An example of a question that is not a yes/no question but can lead to a one word response is: "How satisfied were you with the seminar?" (A one word answer would be: "Very.") More information will be collected with questions such as: "What did you like about the seminar?" and "What didn't you like?"

Break complex questions down into shorter, simpler questions.

For example, instead of asking: "What do you think about having tobacco companies sponsor the rodeo and the big signs they have in the arena?", first ask: "What is your opinion about the tobacco company signs that are displayed in the arena?" Then, when that question has been answered: "In general, what is your opinion about having tobacco company sponsors for the rodeo?"

Avoid the temptation to ask interesting, but non-essential questions.

For example, to be able to compare the opinions of smokers to the opinions of non-smokers, you only need to ask whether the respondent smokes (yes/no). You probably do not need to ask for the number or brand of cigarettes he or she smokes.

Make sure you are asking for the level of detail you need.

For example, in a post-program interview at the end of a cessation program, is it enough to know if the program participant smokes at all (a yes/no question), or do you need to know how many cigarettes are smoked?

Only ask questions that the respondent will be able to answer.

For example, don't ask, "What do you think of implementing a retail licensing policy?" unless you have already established that the respondent is familiar with the concept of retail licensing policies (or the details of the specific policy that is being considered).

Ask questions about the intensity of a feeling expressed (if the information will be used).

For example, if the respondent tells you that she supports a proposed policy, do you need to ask what she would be willing to do to get the policy adopted? Or is it enough to know that she is supportive?

Use language that the respondent will understand.

Avoid jargon, or limit the use of jargon to what is appropriate for that respondent.

Be specific to prevent confusion.

For example, the following question needs to be more specific: "What kind of tobacco products do you use?" You could be interested in the type of tobacco (cigarettes, chew, etc.), but the respondent could think you meant the brand name (Marlboro, Skol, etc.).

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Consider whether the question is better asked as a personal or a general question.

An example of a personal question is: “What is your opinion about the proposed retail licensing policy?” A general version of that question would be: “What, if any, are the strengths of the proposed retail licensing policy?”

Avoid asking leading questions that imply that there is an expected or preferred answer. Watch for wording that is biased, emotionally loaded, or could be considered objectionable (condescending, rude) by the respondent.

For example, it would be inappropriate to say, “I’m sure you’d like to see the policy passed, so what do you think would be the best strategy for making that happen?”

The overall set of questions should be balanced.

Ask about strengths as well as weaknesses, disadvantages as well as advantages.

When respondents may be hesitant to say anything negative, consider using a question that presupposes a negative response.

For example, the question, “What are the weaknesses of the proposed policy?” indicates that there *are* weaknesses and places the focus on identifying any weaknesses. In contrast, “What, if any, are the weaknesses of the proposed policy?” gives the respondent the clear option of saying that there aren’t any. Note that this is the intentional use of a leading question to overcome the reluctance of some respondents to identify weaknesses or give other negative feedback. It should be used sparingly.

Organizing questions

Funnel sequence:

Begin with the most general questions and then narrow the focus by making succeeding questions more specific. For example, you might ask a respondent to describe his/her opinion about retail licensing policies in general before asking for opinions of specific policy options. This approach is useful if the specific questions will give the respondent information that could change his/her initial assessment.

Inverted funnel sequence:

Start with specific questions and end with the most general questions. For example, you might ask about the individual activities of a coalition before asking for the coalition’s effectiveness overall. The respondent may give a more detailed response to the question about overall effectiveness because the earlier question will have made him/her think about the specific activities.

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