

GESIS Panel Frequently Asked Questions on Questionnaire Design

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Table of Contents:

1	Comprehensibility	2
1.1	How shall I treat uncommon terms?.....	2
1.2	What shall I do if I cannot avoid an uncommon term?.....	2
1.3	How shall I treat abstract terms?.....	2
1.4	Can I use complex sentence structures?.....	3
1.5	I would like to put the respondents in a hypothetical situation. Is that possible?.....	3
1.6	What about double-barreled questions?.....	3
1.7	Can I write a question with double negatives?.....	4
1.8	May I use presumptions?.....	4
1.9	Can I use leading questions in my questionnaire?.....	4
1.10	How shall I formulate a dichotomous question?.....	4
2	Recall	5
2.1	What time frame shall I use?.....	5
2.2	What can I do when my question requires very much cognitive effort?.....	5
3	Response Format	6
3.1	How shall I label the categories?.....	6
3.2	How shall I order the categories?.....	6
3.3	What is wrong with timestamps in categories?.....	6
3.4	How many categories should I use?.....	7
4	Rating Scales	8
4.1	How many categories should I use?.....	8
4.2	How shall I label the points?.....	8
4.3	What if I need numbers?.....	8
4.4	Should my rating scale have a midpoint?.....	8
4.5	Should I use a “Don’t know” category?.....	9
	<i>References</i>	9

1 Comprehensibility

One important factor when designing questionnaires is to ensure that researcher and respondent understand a question in the same way. This unified understanding can be harmed by several mechanisms. The following questions are designed to clear up those misunderstandings. Please read them carefully and ensure these situations do not apply to your questionnaire.

1.1 How shall I treat uncommon terms?

Respondents should be able to understand the questions easily. Therefore uncommon terms should be avoided.

Example:	"How often in the last four weeks have you had <i>somatic</i> health problems?"
Better:	"How often in the last four weeks have you had <i>physical</i> health problems?"
Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016	

1.2 What shall I do if I cannot avoid an uncommon term?

If you do not find an alternative for one term, please explain the term.

Example:	"Do you regard yourself to be a digital native?"
Better:	"Digital natives are persons who have access to digital media and grew up using them. Do you think you are a digital native?"

1.3 How shall I treat abstract terms?

If you want precise answers, you have to make precise questions. Please avoid unprecise or abstract terms and specify terms as much as possible. Otherwise, respondents might understand a question in a different manner than you do.

Example:	"Have you visited any doctors recently?"
Better:	"Have you visited any doctors in the past four weeks?" "Have you visited any doctors since the 1 st of April this year?"
Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016	

Example:	"How often do you attend cultural events in your free time?"
Better:	"How often do you attend cultural events, such as concerts, readings or theatre performances in your free time?"
Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016	

1.4 Can I use complex sentence structures?

You should keep the cognitive burden demanded from respondents as low as possible. Therefore you should avoid complex sentence structures.

Example: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Too much money is spent by the government on assisting immigrants."

Better: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Government spends too much money assisting immigrants"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.5 I would like to put the respondents in a hypothetical situation. Is that possible?

Hypothetical questions put a dual burden on respondents because they first have to put themselves in the hypothetical situation and then have to think about the question. This is problematic, especially as researchers cannot figure out how well the respondent managed to put him- or herself in the situation. You should avoid them.

Example: "Suppose you had a grown-up daughter, would you want her to make a career?"

Better: "Should women make a career?"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.6 What about double-barreled questions?

One question should ask for one stimulus only because answers to different stimuli can differ. Please avoid double-barreled questions.

Example: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The State must ensure that people have a good livelihood even in case of sickness, need, unemployment and in old age."

Better: "To what extent do you agree with the following statements:
The State must ensure that people have a good livelihood even in case of sickness.
The State must ensure that people have a good livelihood even in case of need.
The State must ensure that people have a good livelihood even in case of unemployment.
The State must ensure that people have a good livelihood even in case of old age."

or

"To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The State must ensure that people **with low income** have a good livelihood, for example in case of sickness, need, unemployment or in old age."

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.7 Can I write a question with double negatives?

Double negatives are particularly hard to understand. A question should be as simple as possible.

Example: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Poorer countries should not be expected to make less effort to protect the environment than rich countries"

Better: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Poorer countries should be expected to make less effort to protect the environment than rich countries"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.8 May I use presumptions?

Presuppositions should be avoided because respondents do not necessarily share them. The question in the following example assumes that men concentrate too much on their work and then asks if family life suffers from that. Those are two stimuli that should be separated.

Example: "Family life often suffers because men concentrate too much on their work"

Better: "Do you think men concentrate too much on work? If yes, do you think family life suffers because of that?"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.9 Can I use leading questions in my questionnaire?

To find out the true opinion of the respondent, the respondent should not be driven in a certain direction. Therefore you should avoid leading questions.

Example: "Leading scientists are of the opinion that car emissions can impair children's growth. Do you think this opinion is correct or incorrect?"

Better: "Do you think that car emissions can impair children's growth?"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

1.10 How shall I formulate a dichotomous question?

In a dichotomous question formulate both possible answers.

Example: "Do you think that all workers in a company should be in the union?"

Better: "Do you think that all workers in a company should be in the union or that it should be left up to each individual?"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

2 Recall

2.1 What time frame shall I use?

That depends on the event you are asking for. If the event is of little importance for the respondent, happens frequently but irregular or happens regularly, it should be a rather short time frame. For important or infrequent events you can choose a longer frame.

Example: "How many times have you eaten ready meals in the past 30 days?"

Better: "How many times have you eaten ready meals in the past five days?"

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

2.2 What can I do when my question requires very much cognitive effort?

You should try to divide complex questions into multiple questions.

Example: "How many fruits have you bought in the past week?"

Better: "Have you bought any apples in the past week? If yes: How many?"

"Have you bought any bananas in the past week? If yes: How many?"

"Have you bought any grapes in the past week? If yes: How many?"

"How many other fruits have you bought in the past week?"

3 Response Format

3.1 How shall I label the categories?

The response categories should match the question.

Example:	<p>“For each of the following organizations, please state whether you have been an active member of this organization during the past 12 months Sport club – Trade Union – Political Party Response categories: “Often – Sometimes – Rarely – Never”</p>
Better:	<p>Question: “How often were you an active member of the following organizations during the past 12 months?” Response categories: “Often – Sometimes – Rarely – Never” Items: Sport club – Trade Union – Political Party</p>
or	<p>“For each of the following organizations, please state whether you have been an active member of this organization during the past 12 months” Response categories: “Yes – No” Items: Sport club – Trade Union – Political Party</p>

3.2 How shall I order the categories?

The categories should be logically ordered.

Example:	<p>“Since you went abroad, how did your language skills change? My language skills have...” Response categories: “not changed at all -- improved slightly – worsened -- improved significantly”</p>
Better:	<p>Response categories: “improved significantly -- improved slightly -- not changed at all – worsened”</p>

3.3 What is wrong with timestamps in categories?

You should not presuppose that behavior occurs regularly when this is not necessarily the case. If a respondent does not do a behavior regularly, it is hard for him to answer the question.

Example:	<p>“How often do you withdraw money from your bank account?” Response categories: “never – less than once a month -- once a month – every two weeks – every week”</p>
Better:	<p>“How often have you withdraw money from your bank account in the past month?” Response categories: “never – once -- two or three times – four times or more often”</p>
Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016	

3.4 How many categories should I use?

The response categories should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. That means you have to ensure that no respondent would like to give an answer that is not noted and no respondent feels the need to give two answers.

Example:	<p>“The following relates to the recently formed government in Germany. Which political tasks do you think the new Federal Government should focus on in the next four years? Please mark all that apply!”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Development aid for poor countriesAgricultural subsidiesDefence, in particular with armed forces from AfghanistanFinancial crisis in the European Union
Better:	<p>“The following relates to the recently formed government in Germany. Which political tasks do you think the new Federal Government should focus on in the next four years? Please mark all that apply!”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Development aid for poor countriesAgricultural subsidiesDefence, in particular with armed forces from AfghanistanFinancial crisis in the European UnionPromotion of womenPhasing out of nuclear powerIncreasing the number of nursery placesOther

Source: Lenzner/Menold 2016

4 Rating Scales

4.1 How many categories should I use?

The number of categories determines how differentiated the scale is. Most studies researching this topic support scales with five to seven points (Menold/Bogner 2016).

Example:	<p>“How happy are you in your relationship to your partner”</p> <p>Response categories: “completely happy very very happy very happy more than happy happy rather happy more or less happy average more or less unhappy rather unhappy unhappy more than unhappy very unhappy very very unhappy completely unhappy”</p>
Better:	<p>Response categories: “completely happy rather happy average rather unhappy completely unhappy”</p>

4.2 How shall I label the points?

Scales should be labeled completely, verbally and without numbers. The labels should be symmetrical, be comprehensible and suggest differences between the points. Item-specific scales should be preferred over agree/disagree scales.

Example:	<p>“Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?”</p> <p>Response categories: “completely satisfied satisfied rather satisfied average completely unsatisfied”</p> <p>Response categories: “1 2 3 4 5”</p> <p>Response categories: “completely satisfied completely unsatisfied”</p>
Better:	<p>Response categories: “completely satisfied satisfied rather satisfied average rather unsatisfied unsatisfied completely unsatisfied”</p>

4.3 What if I need numbers?

If you need numbers, please choose positive numbers to avoid systematic effects.

Example:	<p>“Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?”</p> <p>Response categories: “-5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5”</p>
Better:	<p>Response categories: “1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11”</p>

4.4 Should my rating scale have a midpoint?

Midpoints facilitate satisficing. However, respondents should have the opportunity to express a neutral opinion. Therefore you should use midpoints.

Example:	<p>“Does the government do a good job?”</p> <p>Response categories: “Yes, always Yes, mostly No, mostly not No, never”</p>
Better:	<p>Response categories: “Yes, always Yes, mostly Usually No, mostly not No, never”</p>

4.5 Should I use a “Don’t know” category?

You should use a “Don’t know” category only if you expect that some respondents truly do not know the answer.

Example:	“Do you own a computer?” Response categories: “Yes, always Yes, mostly Usually No, mostly not No, never Don’t know”
Better:	Response categories: “Yes, always Yes, mostly Usually No, mostly not No, never”
Example:	“Have you installed program X on your computer?” Response categories: “Yes No”
Better:	Response categories: “Yes No Don’t know”

Please formulate the “Don’t know” category in German “Weiß ich nicht”

References

Lenzner, T., & Menold, N. (2016). Question Wording. GESIS Survey Guidelines. Mannheim, Germany: GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. doi:10.15465/gesis-sg_en_017

Menold, N., & Bogner, K. (2016). Design of Rating Scales in Questionnaires. GESIS Survey Guidelines. Mannheim, Germany: GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. doi:10.15465/gesis-sg_en_015

GESIS Panel Website:

<http://www.gesis-panel.org>

GESIS Panel in Social Media:

<https://www.facebook.com/GESISPanel>

https://twitter.com/GESIS_Panel

Contact E-Mail:

gesis-panel@gesis.org