Dillman’s Principles to Create Survey Items

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Question writing principle 1:

- Choose *simple over specialized words*.

  - **Poor example**: Please indicate how many occupants of this household operate a vehicle on a daily basis:

  - **Improvement**: From the people who live in this house, how many drive a car every day?
Question writing principle 2:

- Choose as few words as possible to pose the question.

  - Poor example: Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with standardized testing being required for all elementary school grades in the state of Florida?

  - Improvement: To what extent do you agree or disagree with requiring standardized testing for all elementary school grades?
Question writing principle 3:

- Use complete sentences to ask questions.

- Poor example:
  Years teaching science: ___________

- Improvement:
  For how many years have you taught science?
  Number of years ____________
Question writing principle 4:

- Avoid vague quantifiers when more precise estimates can be obtained.

- How often did you attend religious services during the past year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor example:</th>
<th>Improvement:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>A few times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>About once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>Two to three times a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About once a week</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than once a week</td>
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Question writing principle 5:

- Avoid specificity that exceeds the respondent’s potential for having an accurate, ready-made answer

- Poor example:
  - Please indicate the number of times you visited a park during the spring semester:
    __________ Number of visits to a park
Question writing principle 6:

- Use equal numbers of positive and negative categories for scalar questions.

- Poor example:
  How satisfied are you with your graduate program?

  - Completely satisfied
  - Mostly satisfied
  - Somewhat satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Dissatisfied
Question writing principle 7:

- Distinguish undecided from neutral by placement of the Undecided or No opinion at the end of the scale

- Example of adequate placement:
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  - Undecided
Question writing principle 8:

- Avoid bias from unequal comparison

- Poor example:
Which group plays a major role on student success on standardized tests?

- School
- Family
- Community
- Well-trained teachers
Question writing principle 9:

- *State both sides of attitude scales in the question items.*

  - **Poor example:**
    - To what extent do you agree with requiring Ph.D. students to learn statistics?

  - **Improvement:**
    - To what extent do you agree or disagree with requiring Ph.D. students to learn statistics?
Question writing principle 10:

- Eliminate check-all-that apply question formats to reduce primacy effects.

- Poor example:

Please indicate which type of music you prefer to listen at work (mark all that apply):

- Blues
- Rock
- Jazz
- Salsa
- Hip hop
- Country
Question writing principle 11:

- Develop response categories that are mutually exclusive.

- Poor example:
  From which one of these sources did you first learn about the wild fires?
  - Radio
  - Television
  - Someone at work
  - While at home
  - While traveling to work
Question writing principle 12:

- Use cognitive design techniques to improve recall

- Good examples:
When was the last time you had an accident?
How serious was it?
How long did the emergency response system take to send a person to assist you?

The researcher is most interested in the last question, but uses the others to improve recall.
Question writing principle 13:

- *Provide appropriate time referents.* Can people accurately recall and report past behaviors? Problems happen with events that are either too far in the past or too regular.

**Poor example:**

How many times have you visited the library during the Spring semester?

_____ Number of visits to the library
Question writing principle 14:

- Be sure questions are technically accurate.

Poor example:
Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with requiring that all students who plan to develop a scale for their doctoral dissertations take the survey methods class.

☐ strongly agree
☐ agree
☐ disagree
☐ strongly disagree
Question writing principle 15:

- Choose question words that allows comparison with previously collected data.

- Poor example:
  Time 1:
  - How often do you read to your child?

  Time 2:
  - How often do you read stories to your child?
Question writing principle 16:

- Avoid asking respondents to say yes in order to mean no.

- Poor example:
- Do you favor or oppose not allowing the state to raise taxes without approval of 60% of the voters?
  - Favor
  - Oppose
Question writing principle 17:

- Avoid double barreled questions.

- Poor example:
  Do you agree or disagree with creating an Office of Statistical Support at UF and charging students a fee to use it?

  □ Agree
  □ Disagree
Question writing principle 18:

- **Soften the impact of potentially objectionable questions.** Individuals may not be willing to reveal the requested information.

- **Poor example:**
  
  Please indicate how frequently you have thoughts about leaving your current graduate program?
  
  - [ ] Daily
  - [ ] At least once a week
  - [ ] At least once a month
  - [ ] At least once a semester
  - [ ] Never
Question writing principle 19:

- Avoid asking respondents to make unnecessary calculations.

- Poor example:
  During the last academic year, what percentage of your income was spent with mortgage payments?

  Percentage: __________ %
Question writing principle 20

Make sure the question requires an answer.

Poor example:
When assigning group projects to your students, do you allow them to choose the project’s topic?

☐ Yes
☐ No