

## Top Tips for Self-completion Questionnaires

Self-completion questionnaires will never be totally free of human error, but the questionnaire should be designed to minimise it. As a guide it could be useful to take the following considerations into account during the design stage. This list is not exhaustive!

### 1. User involvement

- If you have time, it's best practice to consult people from the group you're going to survey about the content of the questionnaire. They will know what is important to the customers you're talking to, and the language that they use (not jargon!). It can work extremely well when customers are involved in the design of the questionnaire itself, if that's possible.

### 2. Legislation

- According to the Data Protection Act you must make it clear to people what you are asking them to do (**the principle of transparency**) and get them to agree to it first (**the principle of consent**). It's therefore best practice for a questionnaire to start with an explanation of:
  - What the survey is about
  - Who's doing it
  - How long it will take
  - What will happen to the results - where they're going and what they will be used for
  - How feedback will be given
  - That all research is bound by the Market Research Society Code of Conduct to protect the identities of all respondents (see the Code on [www.mrs.org.uk](http://www.mrs.org.uk)) **or at least** that all info collected will be treated confidentially.
  - Give a contact name and number in case they want to ask questions or need help. Include contact details for the research company as well, if appropriate.
  - If respondents weren't told in the initial survey that their contact details would be entered onto a list that will be used at a later date for something or someone else (i.e. for follow-up with further questions), the DPA says you can't do it later on without first getting their permission. If you might want to come back to them, make it clear that this is what they're signing up to from the start.

### 3. Content

- It's the job of the person designing the questionnaire to make it **as easy as possible** to fill in.
- **'Quick and often' works best** - keep the questionnaire as short as possible. If people are not expecting a survey to land on their doormat, try to limit it the questionnaire so that it takes around 10 minutes to complete (approximately 20-30 questions). Commercial companies generally recommend that postal questionnaires for panel members who've agreed to be surveyed are no more than 8 A4 sides. Sometimes ten questions on one side of A4 paper will be best.
- The questionnaire needs to **flow sensibly** from subject to subject, so that people can understand what is happening, and what is wanted from them.
- **Start with something interesting and easy**, then once they're warmed up move on to the more difficult topics. If you can, end with something easy. Profile information can go at the front or end of a questionnaire, but it can seem off-putting to have it at the front when people have agreed to give you their views. It

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may also send out the wrong kind of message about why you're asking them questions.

### 4. Layout

- Even if your questionnaire is just a sheet of A4 printed in black and white, a **clear layout is crucial** - it needs to look good.
- Allow **plenty of white space** around questions so it's clear where they begin and end. Don't clutter the page.
- **Break the questionnaire up into sections** so that people get a sense of progression and achievement, to help keep them going.
- To help make it clear what's going on **make the text look different** for **SECTION HEADINGS**, *introductory text*, **question text**, **INSTRUCTION TEXT** and responses text. This makes it easier for people to find their way about, follow instructions and answer all the relevant questions. It can also make it look more attractive to read.
- Make the **text big enough to read** easily. If your respondents are likely to include people with visual impairment, allow for this within the design of your questionnaire.
- Allow **plenty of space where you want people to write** in answers - two inches isn't enough!

### 5. Questions

- **Keep it clear and simple** - if a respondent pauses, or has to re-read the question, the words need changing. Can you write your question in under ten words?
- Remember that the **average** adult has a **vocabulary of about 800 words** (what used to be CSE Grade 4 English). You may not be talking to the average adult.
  - Would someone with a reading age of 11 understand what you mean?
  - Most people have little or no interest in local services, and little understanding of how they work. Would your relatives and neighbours understand the question? If the meaning wouldn't be clear to them, the question needs re-writing.
- Questions **should not be leading or biased** in their wording, **or introduce bias** through ambiguity:
  - Ratings questions are useful, but can be confusing, so it's helpful to give **clear instructions every time** you use one: 'Please give your answer on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is 'not at all satisfied' and 5 is 'very satisfied'.
  - If you're asking people to rate staff or services for different characteristics, make sure you only ask them to **rate one thing at a time** - staff can be friendly without being helpful, so won't necessarily work to ask about 'how friendly and helpful' they are.
  - It's best practice to make sure that all **scales are balanced**, with equal numbers of possible positive and negative responses. Avoid having 'quite good' and 'fairly good' responses in the same scale - they could be interchangeable.
  - It's best practice to **have a mid-point** on the scale too. (It isn't best practice to force people into a positive or negative response if they genuinely have no strong feelings on the subject.) The mid-point is usually reported as 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' or the equivalent wording.

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- Some questionnaires don't provide a '**don't know**' response, as it allows people to avoid thinking about the question. Technically this is forcing respondents to give you an answer, which is not right if they genuinely don't know. Nevertheless, it is true that if a 'Don't know' box is available, people will tick it. (Sometimes it can be useful to know that *they* don't.)
  - Questions need to be **interpreted by all respondents in the same way**. Therefore they need to be as simple as possible. It's also a good idea to make everyone answer questions in relation to their **last** visit or experience, and keep reiterating that throughout the questionnaire. If you don't, you risk being told about the poor service that people received some time ago. If you do ask about the last visit, you should find bad experiences included by the law of averages.
  - **Ranking questions** (that ask people to put things in order of preference) tend to cause all kinds of confusion. If you have to use them, keep them simple. It's easiest to rank things by presenting people with two possibilities at a time, and asking which is more important. You repeat this until all possible combinations have been ranked. However, that doesn't really work for postal surveys. Ranking is therefore best avoided - if you can't, then keep the list to be ranked **very** short and make the instructions crystal clear.
- Make sure you allow a '**not applicable**' response where it's appropriate. Respondents find it very irritating when they are unable to answer and think they shouldn't have been asked the question. From their point of view why should they bother answering if the person writing the questions hasn't thought of what someone in their circumstances might want to say? They may well drop out at this point.
  - When analysing data it's quite useful to **treat 'don't know', 'not applicable' and blank or refused answers separately** - they are completely different and 'don't know' and 'not applicable' are perfectly valid responses to a question. As a rule if respondents consider that the question is 'not applicable' to them, you are entitled to remove them from the analysis. This isn't necessarily true if they responded 'don't know', but is generally done to find mean ratings for questions with scale.
  - If you've removed people from the analysis, it's misleading to the person reading the report if you don't tell them that you have taken them out. It's clearest if you **explain what the question was, and how many people didn't respond**, but then **report the data based on the rest** (i.e. work out the percentages again on the reduced number of respondents). **Don't report data with non-respondents included** in the base - it skews the results.

## 6. Instructions

- For self-completion questionnaires **instructions** are essential for reducing human error during completion of the questionnaires.
- If there's space it can be useful to give a **definition of whoever is supposed to be answering the question** above questions that don't apply to everyone. After people have been routed different ways through the questionnaire it can help to reduce error if you put '**EVERYONE:**' above the first question that is applicable to everyone.
- **To help clarify what you want it's a good idea to give an instruction after every question**, so people know how to respond: '**PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY**' or '**PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY**'.

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- If you're making some people skip a question, give a **clear instruction** over where they should go: **'Go to 4'**.
- **Triple-check the routing is right** before you print the questionnaires!
- **Get someone to pilot the questionnaire before it's printed.** A fresh pair of eyes is very useful. It's best if this person comes from the group of people you're intending to survey.
- In complicated questionnaires it can be useful to tell those who aren't skipping questions to **'Continue Q3'** so they all know where they are.
- Make sure the **return date and address appear clearly** (and correctly) on the questionnaire, even if you've sent them return envelopes - they might get lost.