

Formatting a Mail Questionnaire¹

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INTRODUCTION

The format of a questionnaire is its physical arrangement of questions on the page. It concerns its general appearance and is vital to a successful study. A well-planned and carefully constructed questionnaire will increase the response rate and will greatly facilitate the summarization and analysis of the collected data (Berdie et al., 1986). Some researchers believe that the questionnaire format frequently determines whether it is read or discarded. Once the respondent takes the effort to read it, he or she has some psychological commitment to completing it (Levine and Gordon, 1958).

A good format consists of clear and brief instructions, transitional phrases, coherent groupings of items, appropriately used graphics, and an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of questions. The general principle to follow is to put the need of the respondent first. Put yourself in the respondents place and you can come up with creative ways to make the questionnaire appealing to the eye and as easy as possible to answer.

INSTRUCTION

Instructions function as the respondents roadmap: they are statements used at the beginning of and throughout the questionnaire to tell the respondent how to complete the questionnaire. Questions should be constructed so that they do not require extensive instructions, but the instructions that are necessary should be clear, brief, and easy to follow. To catch the respondents eye, they should be printed in boldface or italics.

Example

The above example would serve as a general instruction at the beginning of the questionnaire. It tells the respondent how to complete the questionnaire (circle the numbers or check boxes), and how to return the questionnaire, and it calls their attention to some questions that have a special instruction. It is brief and clear, easy to follow.

For some questions, you need to write separate instructions. Note question 2 of the following example.

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 2. C. L. Taylor, Professor and Extension Specialist, Program Evaluation and Organizational Development, and W. R. Summerhill, Professor and Director of IFAS Personnel Affairs, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 1992.

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Example

1. Have you received information about citrus root weevils?
 - a. YES
 - b. NO
 - c. UNCERTAIN
2. If you answered *YES* to *Question 1*, what type of information have you received? (Circle the number of all that apply)
 - a. identification of adult citrus root weevils
 - b. identification of damage to citrus by root weevils
 - c. root weevil detection methods

For question 2, a separate instruction is needed to complete the question.

TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

Transitional phrases are used when changing topics so that it will be easier for respondents to switch their train of thought (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982).

In some situations, a transitional phrase helps to orient respondents and alert them that they are dealing with a different topic.

Example

ABOUT THIS BEEF OPERATION

1. This beef operation is (check one or both)
 - _____ COMMERCIAL
 - _____ PUREBRED etc.

REPRODUCTION

1. Approximate number of cows and heifers exposed to a bull in 1988: _____

Example

Now regarding civil rights activity...

- Have you ever gone to a civil rights rally?
- a. YES

b. NO

GRAPHICS

Graphics are visual indicators. Proper use of them is an efficient way to guide the respondent. These tools may include arrows, tables, hats, and upper and lower case letters. Logos at the top of the page make a pleasant and interesting appearance. Also, different colored paper for different sections of the questionnaire makes it easier to complete the questionnaire.

Arrows

Example

Do you feel that the Agricultural Computer Short Course/Trade Show should be continued?

- 1 YES -----> If yes, what are your suggestions for the following?
 - a. where to hold _____
 - b. when to hold _____
 - c. how often to hold _____
 - d. time of year _____
- 2 NO
- 3 UNCERTAIN