

A Recap & Slight Modification of Fowler's Seven Principles of Good Survey Design

Principle 1: The strength of a questionnaire lies in asking people about their first-hand experiences, about what they have done, their current situation, and their feelings and perceptions. Put another way, respondents have to respond cognitively – they have to “know the answer” to the question.

- A. Beware of asking about information that is acquired secondhand.
- B. Beware of hypothetical questions.
- C. Beware of asking about causality.
- D. Beware of asking respondents about solutions to complex problems.

Principle 2: Ask one thing at a time.

- A. Avoid asking two questions at once
- B. Avoid questions that make unwarranted assumptions
- C. Beware of questions that include hidden contingencies

Principle 3: Word questions so that every respondent is answering the same question

- A. As much as possible, choose the words in a question so that all respondents understand what they mean and all respondents have the same sense of what the word means.
- B. If you must use a word or term whose meaning may NOT be shared by all respondents, provide a definition of what you mean by the term.
- C. If you refer to a time period, be unambiguous.
- D. If you have to ask something complex break it into manageable parts by asking multiple questions.

Self-completion questionnaires can be administered many ways – on the internet, on a piece of paper, or by an interviewer who asks the questions to each respondent. The term “self-completion” really means that the respondent gets no prodding, clarification, or probing. They just follow the instructions and answer the question. Every respondent must get the same information.

Principle 4: If an interviewer will administer the questionnaire, the script must be complete and adequate so that every respondent will be fully prepared to answer the questions. You have to say the same thing to every respondent and the interviewer cannot “add” information or change the wording on a question.

- A. If you are going to provide a definition, do so before you ask the question, no matter how the questionnaire is administered.
- B. End the question with the question itself. If an interviewer is going to read response alternatives, they should constitute the final part of the question. Simply put, give the response alternatives last, not first.

Principle 5: Clearly communicate what constitutes an adequate answer to a question – to every respondent.

- A. Specify the number of responses to be given to questions when more than one answer is possible.

Principle 6: Design the instrument to make it as easy as possible for interviewers or the respondent to read the questions, follow instructions and record answers.

Principle 7: Measurement will be better if all respondents know what kind of information you need from them. Explain what kinds of things you will be asking, for each set of questions if the questions cover different topics.