

---

## **HOW CAN WE DESIGN SURVEY INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES TO GIVE US THE BEST INFORMATION POSSIBLE?**

Much of the advice in the Tip Sheet on focus groups will be valuable to consider for surveys as well – for example, with regard to whether the interviewer should be of the same race, ethnic group and/or gender and to the issue of cultural biases in the questions asked and the possible answers provided. In addition,

- Pretest the interview or questionnaire with a variety of people from the groups you are going to survey.
  - Pretesting will give you the opportunity to ask respondents what they understood the questions to be asking and why they chose the answers they did. Make sure that the intent of the survey questions is clear to potential respondents. Also, check that the answer categories you provide are distinct and mutually exclusive and they cover the full range of common responses. Be clear whether you want the respondent to pick just one response or more than one.
  - Pretesting will also give you a better estimate of how long it will take to answer the survey and help uncover any errors in directions given within the survey, such as instructions to skip certain questions based on previous answers.
- When translating survey directions, questions, and responses, be sure to translate in both directions – for example, from Spanish into English and then back to Spanish – to make sure that the intended meaning remains the same.
  - Use another bi-lingual native speaker of the language into which the survey is being translated to translate into that language.
  - Then use a bi-lingual native speaker of the original language to translate the survey back into that language.
  - If there are multiple dialects or regional or other differences in the language, consider how to accommodate these within the survey document or in interviewer training or both.
- The skills of the interviewer (if the survey is to be conducted in-person or by telephone) are critical to creating a setting in which all participants feel comfortable sharing their beliefs, feelings, and experiences.
  - As in focus groups, often moderators are selected from the same racial, ethnic, or cultural group as the survey respondents.
  - Interviewers should be thoroughly trained so that they understand the intent and flow of the questions and are able to ask the questions clearly and without hesitation.
  - Interviewers should also be trained in the use of “neutral probes” – questions designed to encourage respondents to give full and detailed answers and/or to choose among provided answer categories, without suggesting any particular response. Neutral probes include such questions as: “Can you tell me more about that?” “Would you say your opinion is closer to X or to Y?”

## HOW CAN WE DESIGN SURVEY INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES TO GIVE US THE BEST INFORMATION POSSIBLE?

- When designing a questionnaire that is to be completed by the respondents on their own, pay attention to the layout of the document as well as to the wording of questions and clarity of instructions.
  - In general, the fewer pages in the questionnaire, the more likely people are to complete it.
  - However, make sure you allow enough space within questions – between answer categories – so that respondent’s answers can be accurately read.
  - Also, provide “white space” between questions – this helps the respondent read the questions without strain.
- The order of questions can be important as well – where certain questions are within the document and where they are in relation to each other.
- Generally, surveys begin with factual information that is easy for the respondent to provide and is generally not considered “sensitive” in nature. Examples are questions about the respondent’s household – who lives there and how they are related or about the respondent’s education, occupation, and marital status.
- Questions that are intended to understand the various ways in which a respondent thinks or feels about an issue are sometimes asked together in a series, and sometimes asked at different points in the questionnaire. Decide whether you believe it would be better to have respondents consider the different aspects of the issue in relation to each other or independently. Be aware that respondents will remember previous questions that are similar and may be concerned that you are “testing” their memory.
- Survey questionnaires should take into account the tendency of many people to choose the “socially acceptable” answer.
  - To avoid the tendency to agree with a series of statements regardless of their content, vary the way in which they are asked so that some would require a “disagree” response to be in line with other answers. For example, if a respondent is being asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about banking practices that may affect the access of different racial or ethnic groups to mortgages, ask some questions so that an “agree” answer indicates an opinion that such practices negatively affect access and other questions in which a “disagree” answer indicates this opinion.
  - It can be helpful to precede a series of questions like this with statements like: “People have different opinions on ....” Or “Some people feel that..., while others feel that ....”