

2e – A Guide to Data Collection Techniques

Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a set of questions that a researcher may ask of a population set (usually members of the public) to find out facts about them and their opinions. Questionnaires are usually designed to be quick and easy to answer, with a focussed set of questions used to determine exactly what the researcher intends to find out. A set of ten questions is usually the limit to which people will respond.



The design and wording used within questionnaires are essential to their success. An ambiguous question could result in an answer that is not useful to the overall study and a respondent may not feel comfortable answering questions that they do not actually understand. For example a question such “Where are you from?” could mean a country of ethnic origin, a home address or the place they have travelled from that day. Equally, a researcher may ask a question to which the respondent simply does not know the answer, such as “How far in miles have you travelled today?”

Questionnaires should be a mixture of open and closed questions. Open questions allow the reader to choose their own response, while a closed question will have a limited number of answers; often just a yes or no response. An example of a closed and an open question is shown below.

Open question: “Use three words to best describe how you feel about the new pier.”

Closed question: “Do you own or have regular use of a car?”



A questionnaire should start with fairly closed questions (such as whether they see themselves as a local or a visitor to the area in question). After that the questions may start to be more open, where the respondent may start to give their opinions on the particular issue the researcher is investigating. However, it is not necessarily true that in order for a respondent to give an opinion, the question has to be an open one – getting a respondent to choose from a pre-chosen list of adjectives can be a good way of managing responses and making them easier to analyse once back in the classroom. If it is important to ascertain the rough age category or the sex of a respondent, then these

boxes can be completed by the interviewer themselves, after the respondent has gone.

The questions should be sensitive to what respondents may feel comfortable discussing. For example, a respondent may not wish to divulge their age, so it may be necessary to ask them to choose from a set of age categories. Equally, few people are happy to give details of their home address to someone they do not know, but when given the option of just providing their postcode, more respondents are likely to answer positively.

Once you have designed your questionnaire, it is a good idea to test it on someone who does not understand what you are trying to find out. Any glitches can then be ironed out before it goes live to members of the general public. You may also wish to carry out a pilot questionnaire in the field to test the suitability of your questions and the kind of data you might get back. You can then redraft the questionnaire and have a stronger and better prepared analysis as a result. The data from this pilot questionnaire should not be included in the final data set.

The process of recruiting people to take part in a questionnaire is worth some careful planning. Stopping people in the street can allow you to find more respondents than, for example, a door-to-door drop of a photocopied questionnaire that requires a written response. However, there are issues with on-the-street questionnaires that, due to the times when a researcher undertakes this process, a certain demographic of a population may be over represented compared to others. This in itself may, or may not, have an influence on the nature of the conclusions the researcher is able to draw. There are several ways of collecting questionnaire responses using a link to an online survey (e.g. Google Forms or SurveyMonkey), which may be appropriate and should certainly be considered.

As part of the recruitment process you should also consider the sampling strategy you employ. The separate guide in this series gives further details about the types of sampling open to use but the researcher may wish to consider a random selection (such as questioning every tenth person who walks past the interviewer) or a systematic sample (such as ensuring there are equal number of respondents from different age groups). Equally, the researcher should consider how many completed questionnaires are needed in order for any conclusions drawn from them to be deemed valid. In most research a minimum of thirty responses is sought initially. In some cases, the researcher will carry out a rudimentary data analysis at this stage before going back into the field to collect a further fifteen or twenty responses. If the trends in the data remain the same after the second round of responses, then it is likely that the researcher has enough data to work with.

If you are undertaking a face-to-face survey, consider whether you will read the questions to the respondent or have the respondent read them themselves. Not every member of the public may have a grasp of technical geographical language, nor indeed have English as their first language and some questions may have to be worded differently so that any person is able to answer them. If the researcher is giving the respondent a list of options, these may need to be printed separately so they can consider them in their own time. Few people are likely to remember a list of eight or nine options when they are read out to them.

It may go without saying but it is not uncommon for market research companies and other commercial enterprises to be carrying out surveys in the same space as you and as a result recruitment can be challenging as respondents may feel they are being bothered. Introducing yourself and the purpose of your research briefly as well as being polite, approachable, smiley and grateful can go a long way to getting a higher number of respondents. It is also worth remembering that the respondent has entered into the questionnaire willingly and if they decide part way through the questions that they would rather not continue, or that they wish to change an answer, they should of course have the ability to do so.