



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 respondent's 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 respondent's 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 respondent's eye, they should be printed in boldface or italics.

Example

Instruction: Answer by filling out the items on the questionnaire as they relate to you. For most answers, circle the number or check the box most applicable to you. Where other responses are called for, special instructions are given. When completed, return the questionnaire in the business reply envelope.

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

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1. This document is Circular PE-17, a series of Program Evaluation and Organizational Development, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: October 1992.
 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.

Acknowledgements:

Kevin Coll, Technical Writer
Beiyao Zheng, Graduate Student, Literature Review
Rita Johnson, Typing and Layout

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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.

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

Tables

A table is special instructions enclosed within bold lines to give extra emphasis; see examples below.

Example

Have you ever had personal contact with any of the following IFAS personnel (check all that apply)?

- local county agents
- state Extension specialists
- researchers at IFAS research centers
- other IFAS staff (specify): _____

If you have never had contact with any of the above, go to item B, question 6.

Table and Arrows in Combination

Example

Do you presently own or have major management (decision making) responsibility for a commercial (10 acres or more) citrus operation? (circle number beside appropriate response)

- 1. YES
- 2. NO ----->

If NO, there is no need to go further. Simply return this questionnaire in the postage paid envelope provided. Thank you.

If YES- PLEASE READ CAREFULLY! Many citrus operations involve more than one type of fruit (oranges, grapefruit, mandarins). . . .

Hats

Hats are line drawings used to separate options.

Example

Please rate the usefulness of each of the following types of CD-ROM technologies as a tool for accessing information to help solve clientele problems. (Please circle your answer.)

very	not	uncertain
useful	useful	

Printing publications	3	2	1
Displaying images	3	2	1

Lower case and upper case letters

Use lower case letters for questions, upper case for answers or response options.

Example

"Do you own your home?"

- 1. NO
- 2. YES

Paper Color

Use high quality paper, different colors of paper and/or ink, and high quality printing to create a questionnaire that is appealing to the eye. Taylor and Summerhill (1985) found that color had no significant effect on the response rate when the respondent population has some familiarity with the sender. However, Pituanuwat and Phattharayuttawat (1991) found paper color effective in increasing response rate in their study. A pleasant appearance will not guarantee that people will respond, but it will increase your chance of getting a response.

ARRANGEMENT OF QUESTIONS AND OPTIONS ON THE PAGE

Proper arrangement of questions and options can give the questionnaire a pleasant appearance. Questions can be arranged to extend the width of the whole page or the width of a column. Arranged either way, they should not be crowded on the page, but surrounded by some white space. Make questions fit each page; avoid having the respondent turn pages in the middle of a question.

Options can be arranged vertically or horizontally. Sudman and Bradburn (1982) recommended the vertical option format be used.

Examples of arrangement of options:

Horizontal options

Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	No opinion	Disagree
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- 1. Water pollution is a serious threat to the Middle Suwannee River Basin A B C D E (circle letter).

Vertical options

2. Current water quality restrictions in the Middle Suwannee River Basin are greater than they should be (circle letter).
 - a. STRONGLY AGREE
 - b. AGREE
 - c. NO OPTION
 - d. DISAGREE
 - e. STRONGLY DISAGREE

If instructions say to check (✓) the response option, Berdie (1986) feels respondents will make fewer mistakes with vertical options than with horizontal.

COHERENT GROUPING OF QUESTIONS

The grouping of questions may have a significant effect on the quality of information collected. In a study of two types of questionnaire formats, one with items measuring the same dimensions distributed randomly, the other with items measuring the same dimension grouped together, Schriesheim and Denisi (1980) found the former superior in convergent and discriminate validity. So, group questions into logically coherent sections. Those that deal with a specific topic or those that use the same response options should be formatted together.

The first question is the most crucial one in determining if the questionnaire is destined for the garbage or the mailbox. The first question should:

- a. Be clearly related to the survey topic
- b. Be easily understood
- c. Be easily answered (not an open-ended question)
- d. Convey a sense of neutrality (avoid a statement with which respondents are asked to express agreement or disagreement)
- e. Be applicable to everyone (avoid a question which has a "does not apply" or "unsure" category)
- f. Be interesting to all respondents

Generally put demographic information, personal information, at the end of the questionnaire.

RESPONDENT'S NAME, ADDRESS, AND IDENTIFICATION NUMBER

Put the name and address of the person to whom the form should be returned on the questionnaire, even if you include a self-addressed return envelope, since questionnaires are often separated from the cover letter and envelope.

Respondents may have an aversion to including their name on mail questionnaires. However, studies indicate that most respondents do not mind answering numbered questionnaires. This is especially true if confidentiality of information is assured. Numbers enable the surveyor to identify those questionnaires that have not been returned and initiate follow-up with specific individuals without having to contact again all those involved in the survey. The questionnaire identification number should be placed on the cover in plain view.

BOOKLET FORM VS. STAPLED FORM

Sudman and Bradburn(1982) recommended that booklet format should be used to make it easier for the respondent to read and turn pages and to prevent lost pages. In terms of response rate, the format doesn't seem to make much difference. Boser (1989) found that when the same questions are used, there is no significant difference between questionnaires of different lengths, between questionnaires with a professional appearance (typeface) and those that were typed, and between booklet and stapled questionnaires.

Boser (1990) found similar results in another study. Questionnaire type font (conventional typewriter type and professional-appearing type) and construction (single pages, stapled, and booklet) did not have a significant effect on response rate. However, because of the narrowness of the scope of subjects in these studies, generalizations from these conclusions should be made cautiously.

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