



# Harvard University Program on Survey Research

## TIP SHEET ON QUESTION WORDING

### General Considerations

The ideal question accomplishes three goals:

It measures the underlying concept it is intended to tap

It doesn't measure other concepts

It means the same thing to all respondents

The following rules help to accomplish this:

**Avoid technical terms and jargon.** Words used in surveys should be easily understood by anyone taking the survey. Examples: "Do you support or oppose tort reform?" "Should people held on terror related crimes have the right of *habeas corpus*?"

**Avoid Vague or Imprecise Terms.** Usually, it's best to use terms that will have the same specific meaning to all respondents. For example, it's not clear what you get when you ask "How important is it that a candidate shares your values?" You might get a more consistent answer if you asked: "How important is it that a candidate shares your religious values?"

**Define Things Very Specifically:** For example, don't ask: "What is your income?" A better question would be specific and might ask: "What was your total household income before taxes in 2005?"

**Avoid Complex Sentences.** Sentences with too many clauses or unusual constructions often confuse respondents. Scales that ask respondents to make complex calculations can cause problems. How easy will it be for a typical person to answer: "Do you think the increase in the rate of immigration, controlling for the economy, is higher or lower than the increase in the rate of crime in your area?"

**Provide Reference Frames:** Make sure all respondents are answering questions about the same time and place. For example, if you ask: "How often do you feel sad?" some people might provide an answer about their life's experience, while others might only be thinking about today. Usually, it's better to provide a reference frame: "How often have you felt sad during the past week?" Don't ask: "How good is the economy these days" and assume everyone is talking about the same economy. A better way might be to ask: "How good is the national economy these days" or "How good is the economy in your community these days"

**Make Sure Scales Are Ordinal:** If you are using a rating scale, each point should be clearly higher or lower than the other for all people. For example, don't ask "How many jobs are available in your town: Many, a lot, some, or a few." It's not clear to everyone that "a lot" is less than "many." A better scale might be: "A lot, some, only a few, or none at all."

**Avoid Double-Barreled Questions.** Questions should measure one thing. Double barreled questions try to measure two (or more!) things. For example: "Do you think the president should

lower taxes and spending.” Respondents who think the president should do only one of these things might be confused.

**Answer Choices Should Anticipate All Possibilities.** If a respondent could have more than one response to a question, it’s best to allow for multiple choices. If the categories you provide don’t anticipate all possible choices, it’s often a good idea to include an “Other-Specify” category.

**If You Want a Single Answer, Make Sure Your Answer Choices Are Unique and Include all Possible Responses** If you are measuring something that falls on a continuum, word your categories as a range. For example, the following scale misses possible responses: “What punishment should this person receive: No punishment, Five years in prison, Ten years in prison, Twenty years in prison, Life in prison, or the death penalty?” A better scale might be worded: “What punishment should this person receive: No punishment, Punishment not including jail time, Up to five years in prison, From five years to ten years in prison, From ten years to 20 years in prison, More than 20 years but less than life in prison, Life in prison, or the death penalty?”

**Avoid Questions Using Leading, Emotional, or Evocative Language.** For example, “Do you believe the US should immediately withdraw troops from the failed war in Iraq?” “Do you support or oppose the death tax?.” Sometimes the associations can be more subtle. For example, “Do you support or oppose President Bush’s plan to require standardized testing of all public school students?” Some people might support or oppose this because it is sponsored by President Bush, not because of their opinions toward the merits of policy.