

Asking Questions 2

11 November 2009
Lecture 3

Topics for Today

- Designing Questions to Gather Factual Data
 - Question Objectives
- Definition of Concepts and Terms
- Knowing and Remembering
 - Do Respondents Know the Answer?
 - Stimulating Recall
 - Placing Events in Time
- The Form of the Answer
- Reducing the Effect of Social Desirability on Answers
 - Data Collection Procedures
- Source: Fowler Chapter 4

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5 Challenges to Writing Good Questions

1. **Defining objectives** and specifying the kind of answers needed to meet the objectives of the question
2. Ensuring that all respondents have a **shared, common understanding of the meaning of the question.**
3. Ensuring that people are asked questions to which **they know the answers.** Barriers to knowing the answers can take at least **three forms:**
 - a) **never having the information** needed to answer the question
 - b) having the information at some point, but **being unable to recall the information** accurately or in the detail required by the question
 - c) (for those questions that ask about events or experiences during some period of time) difficulty in **accurately placing events in time**
4. Asking the questions that respondents are **able to answer in terms required by the question.**
5. Asking questions the respondents are **unwilling to answer accurately.**

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Example: Challenge 1

1. **Defining objectives and specifying the kind of answers needed to meet the objectives of the question**

- We may ask: **"Does the application ever crash with unhandled exceptions? If so, when?"**
- **Fails the first test because:**
 - Doesn't **define the terms**
 - **How** the respondent should answer
 - "Yes. Once or twice a week"
 - "Yes. On Sundays before 8am when I try to open up reports from the previous week's complete jobs and press on the 'Print to PDF' button."

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Example: Challenge 2

2. **Ensuring that all respondents have a shared, common understanding of the meaning of the question.**

- We may ask: **"Does the application ever crash with unhandled exceptions? If so, when?"**
- **Fails the second test because:**
 - What if it's asked to non-technical people?
 - What's an "unhandled exception"?
 - Unhandled exceptions are shown differently in OS' and even versions of Windows
 - Hang, dialog box, error notice, debug notice

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Example: Challenge 3

3. **Ensuring that people are asked questions to which they know the answers.** Barriers: **never, unable to recall, can't place**

- **We could ask:** "How many times in the past week were you forced to restart the application due to an error or it stopping to respond?"
- **Here we fail all of them:**
 - If you use it so often, who's counting?
 - They used to count, but now can't recall it
 - Can't remember what was last week, two weeks ago, or last month

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Example: Challenge 4

4. Asking the questions that respondents are **able to answer in terms required by the question**.
 - **We could ask:** "How many times in the past week were you forced to restart the application due to an error or it stopping to respond?" and let them fill in a number
 - **Here we fail the fourth principle:**
 - What if they want to answer: "It crashes only when I have MS Word running in the background."
 - That's much more informative – but they can't write it

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Example: Challenge 5

5. Asking questions the respondents are **unwilling to answer accurately**.
 - **We could ask:** "What other applications were you running on your computer when the application last crashed?"
 - **Here we fail the fifth principle:**
 - The answer might be a program the user is not supposed to be running at work (Solitaire, Kazaa, Skype, online games)
 - The interaction is important – but no one will admit it

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The Form of the Answer

- **Most questions specify a form the answer is supposed to take**
 - Check the form fits the answer that the respondents have to give
- **Example:** "In the past 30 days, did you get fast resolutions from the help desk, slow resolutions, or no resolutions at all?"
- **The problem:** The response time for particular queries varies by the load on the help desk staff (which may vary from day to day)
- **Also,** it didn't ask about the problems referred to for resolutions
 - Some may take longer to respond
 - Some may take less time
 - Some may be impossible to resolve

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Examples

- **Example:** "On days when you use the remote login service, how many hours do you usually use it for?"
- **The problem:** The usage of the remote login service may be higher in general on weekends than weekdays (since more people work from home)
 - It's not clear what the "usual" answer is.
- **Another example:** "How many kilometers are you from your office?"
- **The problem:** People know the distance, but the question may really be trying to figure out time, not distance
 - Implies asking about the mode of transportation the person uses as well
 - Or just ask how long their average commute is

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Reducing the Effect of Social Desirability on Answers

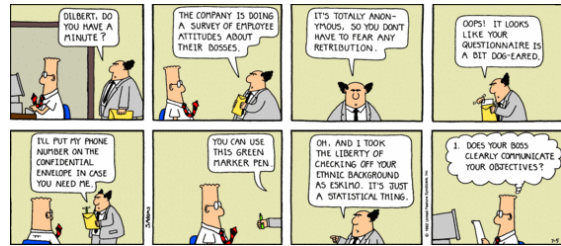
- Studies have shown that **questions about socially sensitive topics give skewed results**
 - Tendency to **underreport events** that will give a bad image – drunk driving
 - Tendency to **over report events** that will give a good image - voting
- People don't want to look bad in front of the interviewer
- If respondents **have fear of improper disclosure**, they might **not want to respond fully or honestly**

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An anonymous questionnaire



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Sensitive answers (not questions)

- Sometimes **people respond incorrectly** because they have a certain **self image that they need to preserve**
- There is no such thing as "sensitive questions", just **"sensitive answers"**
 - Questions about drug use are sensitive to those who use them
 - It's only when a positive (or negative) answer implies a socially unacceptable response that you end up with difficulties
- People have very **different ideas as to what is sensitive**

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Reducing Distortion

- Make the interview experience designed to **reduce the reasons to distort answers**
- Three general classes of steps to **reduce response distortion**
 1. Assure confidentiality
 2. Make accuracy a priority
 3. Reduce the role of an interviewer

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Confidentiality

1. Assure confidentiality
- Survey givers often **assure respondents about the confidentiality of their responses**.
 - Common steps:
 - **Minimizing the use of names**
 - **Dissociating identifiers** from survey responses
 - **Keeping survey forms in locked files**
 - Keeping non-staff people **away from the completed surveys**
 - Seeing to the **proper disposal of survey instruments**

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Confidentiality

- The most important threat is the **ability to link responses to individuals**, so the best thing to do is to either:
 - Use **completely anonymous methods** such as mail or self-administration
 - When there are identifiers, **destroy the links as early as possible**
- Only when respondents **are aware of the protections**, they will feel **secure enough to respond honestly**
- If the limits to confidentiality **leave the respondents in danger**, take steps to **change the questions, method of delivery, or other conditions**

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Accuracy

2. Make accuracy a priority

- If an **interviewer is involved**, the respondent often feels a **social need to give a positive spin and please the interviewer**
- Steps to help improve accuracy:
 - Telling the respondents that **accuracy is essential**
 - Emphasizing that there are **no right or wrong answers**
 - Keeping a **professional tone to the interview**: no stories about themselves, get too personal, or express opinions

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Accuracy

- There are **three behaviors** which can help improve accuracy in responses:
 - **Instructions emphasizing that accuracy** is the priority of the interview
 - Respondents are asked **make a commitment to give accurate answers**
 - Interviewers are **trained to reinforce thoughtful answers**

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Reducing the Role of Interviewer

3. Reduce the role of an interviewer

- Having an interviewer is both a **plus and a minus**
 - Can lead to more **serious and thoughtful answers**
 - Can lead to **social norms causing skewed answers**
- There are **three other ways to reduce interviewer introduced bias**
 - The interviewer gives a series of questions written out and a booklet to answer in. The respondent **seals the answers**.
 - The respondents answer the questions on a **computer**
 - The interviewer record the questions on **tape and the respondent listen to the questions**. The respondent writes the answers in a booklet which is sealed.

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Summary

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