

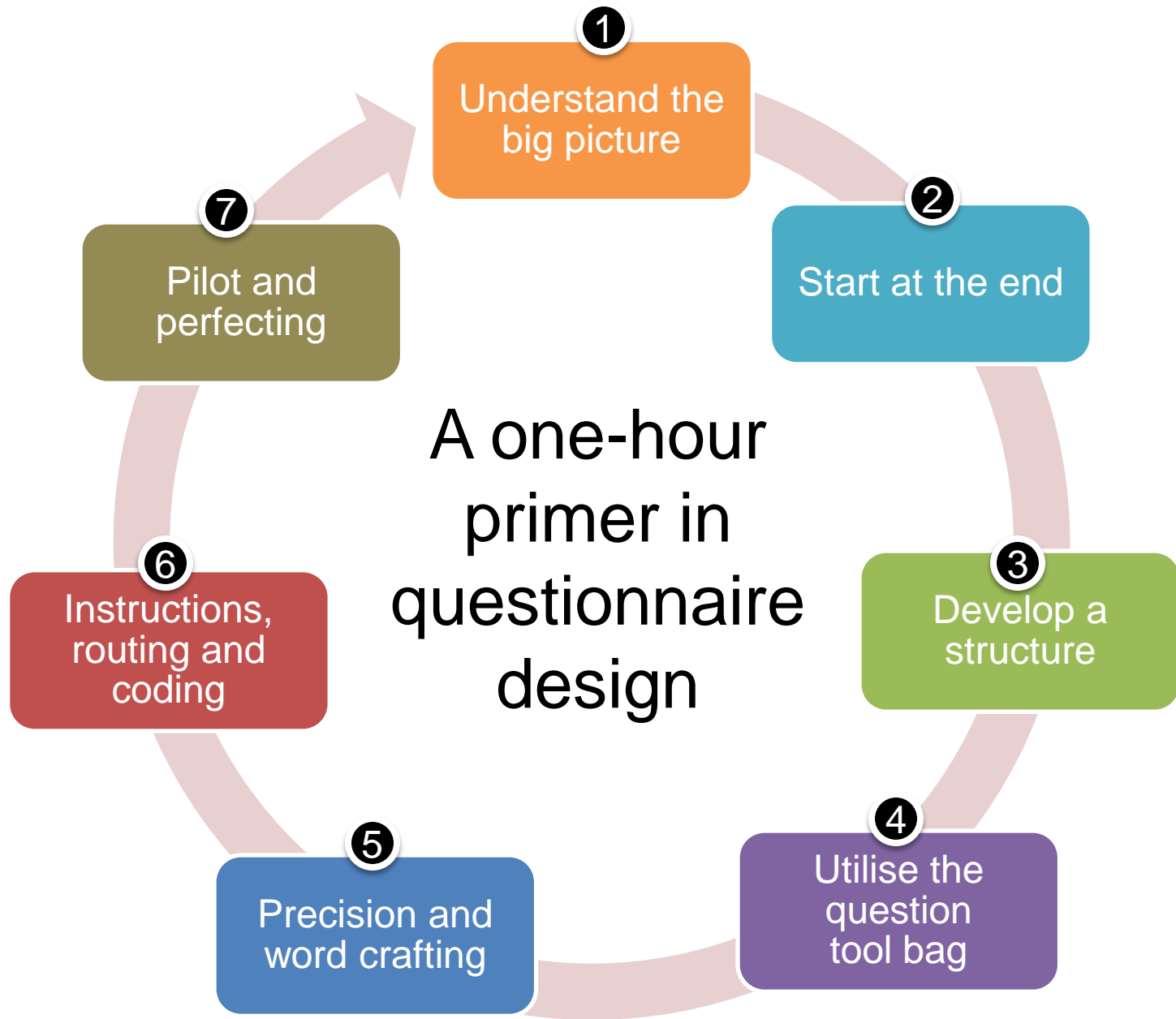
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A One-Hour Primer in Questionnaire Design

An Overview





Nothing is off-limits

A questionnaire can be successfully used to probe into any area of life however taboo, risqué or controversial. This module will guide you through the current best practice in questionnaire design, as well as highlight potential pitfalls and common errors to ensure that you can tackle and subject.



However, although nothing is off-limits, a lot of questionnaires fail to really find out what people think because they break three fundamental rules...

Rule 1: A questionnaire is a dialogue not a monologue

If a respondent is to invest time in completing a questionnaire, it must be engaging. It is vital to provide respondents with an interesting and engaging experience from which they may get some benefit

The goal should be to make your questionnaire as close to normal conversational dialogue as possible, and not to assume that because you are preparing a questionnaire, somehow all of the rules of how conversations and dialogue work are suspended

No one is going to respond well to a tedious experience that encourages yay-saying, with little attention paid to the issues being addressed

Rule 2: You must do justice to the respondent's knowledge

To do justice to the respondents' knowledge, the questions must afford the respondent the chance to impart all of their knowledge on a particular topic in the interview. This means taking three key issues into consideration:

Shallowness vs. depth

A survey needs to strike a balance: you need to ask a series of questions to get fairly top-level attitudes, but also ensure that the survey drills down to a sufficient depth so that it's not trivial

Saliency

A lot of poor feedback from surveys is due to lack of relevance: for example, respondents with no experience of sport being pushed through a very detailed questionnaire, designed with high-level athletes in mind

Frame of reference

Researchers must avoid questions which are too big, abstract and general or far too detailed, technical or specific. A tennis fan, for example, is unlikely to be able to answer questions on the preferred scientific methods to construct a racket

Rule 3: The questionnaire and interview must maintain professionalism

Explain the auspices of the study

In general, it is important to ensure that you explain who the study is being conducted for, and how the results used will benefit the individual, and possibly the wider industry

Convey professionalism

Ensure that your efforts are not affected by missing simple flaws: it is extremely important that errors such as ambiguity and leading questions are avoided

Be ethical

Follow the *ESOMAR/MRS* Code of Conduct and guidelines. Gain informed consent, treat respondent information anonymously and be transparent about how the data will be used

Get it written, then get it right

Like many things in writing, the start is always the hardest. Therefore, it's best to start with the questions that come to mind first, building it up until you have a first draft.

Of course, this won't be the finished questionnaire, but it will have developed a structure (even if it is one you later abandon) which you can edit, delete and add to until you are happy. There are five key questions to help guide you through questionnaire editing:

1. Am I meeting the research objective?

2. Is the questionnaire within the respondents' frame of reference?

3. Is there a balance of attitudes, behaviour and factual questions?

4. Is the depth/shalowness balance right?

5. Does the overall structure work?

Move between large concepts and specific detail

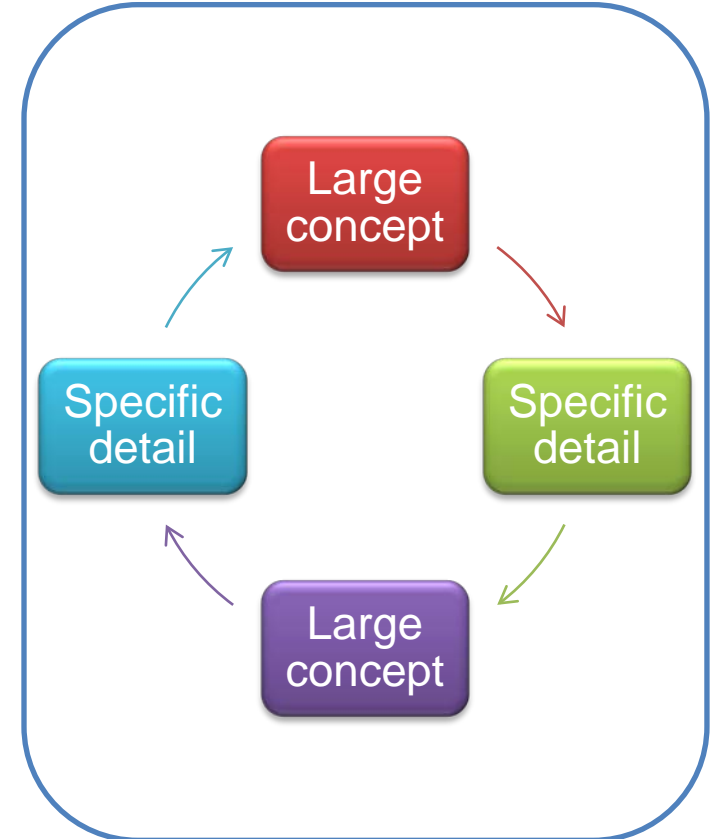
Writing a questionnaire is not a linear process; in general, it is not possible to simply develop a decision tree and then fill in the specific questions

Writing a questionnaire requires you to move between the large concept of the decision tree, the overall flow of the questionnaire and the specific detail of individual questions, which make up each section of the decision tree

Once you have a first draft decision tree, try filling in all the questions that you feel will best explore that section. Now look at your draft questions in relation to the overall decision tree: should some of the questions be moved to a different section? If so, should those sections be moved closer together?

After you have taken this large conceptual view of the decision tree, move into the specific detail of another section and try to infill all the potential questions you require. Now move back to large concept: have you repeated questions from another section? Does the answer to this question need to come before another question? Can only specific respondents answer this question? Now move back to specific detail again

By continually switching between the large concept of the decision tree, the questionnaire's flow and the specific detail of the questions, you will ensure that the questionnaire asks all the right questions in the right order and, most importantly, elicits the right response



Best practice: choosing the right set of questions

Below are seven questions. These are all related to customer satisfaction in banking; this section could be a small area of a larger study of attitudes towards banking. Note how the questions move from general to specific, facts to attitudes and spontaneous to prompted

Question 1: closed question
Where is your main bank account held?
HSBC
Barclays
Don't Know

Question 4: unprompted question
Are there any areas of your bank's customer service you find unsatisfactory?
Interest rate
Customer service
Queuing times in branch
Helpfulness of staff
Online banking security
Don't know

Question 2: statement choice
Below are three statements. Select all statements that reflect your opinion of your bank
My bank provides a high level of anti-fraud protection
My bank provides a good level financial advice
My bank's staff are usually pleasant and helpful
None of the above

Question 5: Verbal Rating Scale
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'The banks have not shown enough responsibility in loaning money.'
Strongly agree
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know

Question 3: choosing alternatives
Thinking about your bank as a customer, which one of the follow options would you rather have?
24-hour customer service
Online banking
Don't Know

Question 6: prompted question
If you were to switch bank, which of the following banks would you consider?
Lloyds TSB
NatWest
HSBC
Barclays
Other:

Question 7: open question
If you were the Chairman of your bank, what would you consider to be main priority for the bank, in order to raise offer a better service to customers?

Skills update: precision and word crafting

By now, you should be able to:

Understand the importance of clarity, precision and succinctness in surveys

Know the four different rules for writing survey questions

Be aware of the 14 common question pitfalls

Understand how to choose the specific words and wording for your question

Confidently pick and choose the right questions specific to the survey needs

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