



Questionnaire design guidelines

May 2006

Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2005) and provide additional best practice guidance. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding.

Research is founded upon the willing co-operation of the public and of business organisations. It relies on the confidence of those involved that it is conducted honestly, objectively, without unwelcome intrusion and without harm to respondents. Its purpose is to collect and analyse information and not to create sales or to influence the opinions of anyone participating.

The general public and other interested parties are be entitled to complete assurance that every research project is carried out in accordance with the Code of Conduct and that their rights and privacy are respected.

Rules from the Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in the shaded boxes. These rules are binding on MRS members and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Members are reminded that this document is designed to compliment the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research with employees and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

1: General

The Rules

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| A1 | Research must conform to the national and international legislation relevant to a given project including in particular the Data Protection Act 1998 or other comparable legislation applicable outside the UK. |
| A3 | Members must act honestly in dealings with Respondents, Clients (actual or potential), employers, employees, sub-contractors and the general public. |
| A10 | Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project. |

Guidance

1. Respondents should be honestly and openly informed about the research they are taking part in.
2. Respondents should openly be asked for consent to take part in research, and to any subsequent attributable use of their comments and answers: in the absence of this consent, all answers will be treated as confidential.
3. Undertakings to respondents (what they are told when they are recruited) should be honoured.
4. Respondents should be treated with respect at all times.
5. Research should respect the interests of clients.
6. The rights of respondents are always paramount. There must be no adverse effects of taking part in a research project.
7. Research should be undertaken, and interpreted, honestly and objectively.
8. In designing questionnaires, the primary concerns are the validity and reliability of the information collected. Validity is of particular relevance as we are at all times attempting

to ensure that respondents are answering research questions in the correct frame of reference.

9. Researchers should ensure:

- That a questionnaire is practically feasible to administer
- Be aware that the modal effects of data collection (i.e. the impact of the types of questions that will be asked - pre-coded, scales, questions using prompt cards, etc.) may have an effect on what constitutes good practical questionnaire design.

2: The Interviewer and the Respondent – gaining and maintaining co-operation

The Rules

- B7 Where lists of named individuals are used e.g. Client databases, the list source must be revealed at an appropriate point in the interview, if requested. This overrides the right to Client anonymity.
- B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.
- B17 Respondents must not be misled when being asked for cooperation to participate in a research project.
- B18 A Respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.
- B21 Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent:
- the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer's Identity Card must be shown if face to face);

- an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct;
- the general subject of the interview;
- the purpose of the interview;
- if asked, the likely length of the interview;
- any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.

B22 Respondents (including employees in employee research) must not be unduly pressurised to participate.

Guidance

1. A good questionnaire should engage the respondent from the start. Technically, the quality of data depends entirely on respondent engagement and interest in the subject matter. Boredom, irrelevance, and questioning that are outside their frame of reference are likely to lead to poor data.
2. In addition, justice should be done to the knowledge and agenda of the respondent. Researchers should consider how the respondent would feel not only at the start of the interview, but during it, and when they have finished. How will they react - will they be willing to help - the next time they are asked to take part in a research project?
3. There are occasions on which the research design requires the precise purpose of the research to be disguised. In such cases, the introduction need not explain the precise objectives of the research, but must honestly explain the broad subject matter. So, for example, in dealing with a subject such as cinema going, it may be legitimate to communicate the subject matter as being about "leisure activities". It is important however to ensure that the description of the subject matter doesn't mislead respondents, in breach of B17.
4. The subject of the interview should be described as precisely as possible and be compatible with the objectives of the study. If any sensitive data is to be collected this must be made clear to the respondent at the time when co-operation is sought.

Researchers should apply their professional judgment in determining what could be sensitive in any given project.

5. The objectives of a research project do not give the researcher a right to intrude on privacy or abandon normal respect for an individual's values. This means that sensitive questioning/subjects must be particularly carefully handled. These could be those that are (a) sensitive to everyone because of the subject matter or (b) sensitive to a particular individual because of that individual's past history, although it could be difficult to know this in advance.
6. In accordance with B18, All respondents must be allowed to exercise their right not to answer a particular question(s) and/or withdraw from the interview at any point. In CAPI or web-site interviews this means that the interview should generally be able to proceed without an answer having to be given.
7. Four major issues are known to impact negatively on both quality of data collected and respondents' attitude towards research. These are
 - Excessively lengthy questionnaires
 - Repetitive questioning.
 - Insufficient opportunity for respondents to have their say
 - Excessive classification section
8. Lengthy interviews can impact on response rates and hence representivity of the sample. Repetitive questions can negatively affect the respondent's willingness to be interviewed in the future and hence adversely affect future response rates.
9. Researchers, on both the client and agency side, should avoid long or repetitive interviews. This may involve a trade off against the "ideal world" objectives. Consider whether or not a question is required in order to meet the objectives, or whether it is "nice to know".
10. Respondents should feel that justice has been done to their knowledge within the confines of the questionnaire or subject matter. This may involve compromise on the part of the researcher.

11. It can be useful to think of the questionnaire as one element in a conversation between interviewer and respondent. It should also be acknowledged that for the majority of respondents some subjects (holidays or cars for example) are likely to be of more interest than others (household appliances or financial services for example). Researchers should take account of this and make particular efforts when dealing with more problematic topics.
12. A questionnaire designed for one interview methodology may need to be amended to be effective in another channel. However, researchers should be aware that may also lead to different answers across channels if adequate care is not taken.

3: Meeting the Objectives

The Rules

- B2 All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.
- B3 Members must take reasonable steps to design research to the specification agreed with the Client.
- B4 Members must take reasonable steps to design research which meets the quality standards agreed with the Client.
- B14 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:
- that questions are fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly
 - that the design and content of questionnaires are appropriate for the audience being researched;
 - that Respondents are able to answer the questions in a way that reflects the view they want to express;
 - that Respondents are not led towards a particular answer;
 - that answers are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way;
 - that personal data collected is relevant and not excessive.

Guidance

1. Researchers should ensure that the objectives of a research project are fully translated into a series of questions, which will, as far as possible, obtain the required data.
2. It is the responsibility of all researchers involved in designing a questionnaire to ensure that the questions included are adequate to enable the study to meet its objectives.

However where a researcher's advice and recommendation is not accepted, the researcher cannot then be held responsible for any consequent failure to meet the objectives.

3. It is the responsibility of both researchers and clients to ensure that the questions asked meet the objectives of the study:
 - The researcher because they have a professional responsibility
 - The client because their commercial and professional interests are at stake.
4. The interests of research at large are thus served through the encouragement of:
 - The credibility of research in the commercial environment
 - Respondent goodwill through a transparent and effective questionnaire.
5. Good practice dictates that questionnaires should be formally agreed to confirm that all parties are satisfied that the research objectives will be sufficiently met within the practicalities of getting the project done, paying particular attention to:
 - Errors of commission (objectives that are badly addressed)
 - Errors of omission (objectives that are not addressed either at all or in part).
6. Clients should take the guidance of researchers as to the feasibility of meeting defined research objectives:
 - Within an interview of a given length
 - Within respondents' ability to give the information required
 - Within ethical and technical best practice.

4: Structuring the questionnaire - its impact on interviewers and respondents

The Rules

- B14 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:
- that questions are fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly
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 - that Respondents are able to answer the questions in a way that reflects the view they want to express;
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 - that personal data collected is relevant and not excessive.

Guidance

1. Whenever possible, a questionnaire should follow some form of natural flow, reflecting a train of thought, a logical conversation, or an implied chronology of events, depending on the subject matter.
2. Good practice is to give high priority to user friendliness in administration, and a structure that is easy to follow for field workers and respondents.
3. Researchers should plan a questionnaire to make it logical from the respondent's point of view. This should involve outlining a structure and routing plan before beginning to write questions. The structure need not follow that of the objectives.
4. Consideration should be given to using blocks of sub group questions and the construction of decision trees or flow charts to assist in structuring (and later routing) a questionnaire.

5. In general, order of questions will have an effect on the answers that are provided. This is generally controllable in an interview setting, but when the questionnaire is self administered, it is not possible to control the order in which the questions are read and answered.
6. Avoidance of non-sequiturs is recommended. Where they are unavoidable (e.g. in omnibus style questionnaires) appropriate linking phrases should be used.
7. To prevent a questionnaire being boring use a variety of different forms of questioning to break the routine within the questionnaire.
8. A theoretically optimal research design can result in a repetitive or boring interview. Researchers should, wherever possible, seek ways of engaging and maintaining the respondent's interest.
9. Question rotations between interviews, although good practice in themselves, are not a solution to this issue and sometimes have the effect of merely spreading unreliability across several questions, rather than concentrating it amongst a few.
10. The main principle is the rigour, integrity and quality of data. Neither interviewers nor respondents should be confused or bored by any questionnaire.
11. The guiding rule can be expressed as "doing justice to how people would normally talk about things".

5: Writing the Questionnaire

The Rules

- B14 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:
- that questions are fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly
 - that the design and content of questionnaires are appropriate for the audience being researched;
 - that Respondents are able to answer the questions in a way that reflects the view they want to express;
 - that Respondents are not led towards a particular answer;
 - that answers are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way;
 - that personal data collected is relevant and not excessive.

Guidance

1. In summary, will the respondents:
 - Understand the questions?
 - Be willing to answer the questions?
 - Be able to answer the questions?
2. In practice every researcher knows that there is no right and wrong question or answer, and that, legitimately, different questions get different answers. The prescription for writing questions is therefore intrinsically linked to the interpretation of the results and data that will be obtained.
3. It is possible to frame questions or question sequences to support or dismiss any point of view, with varying degrees of subjectivity built in. This is particularly relevant to published research, and question wording is particularly crucial in opinion and advocacy

research. Researchers involved in conducting opinion research for publication should refer to the *MRS Public Opinion Research Guidelines* (currently being drafted) for particular guidance in this area.

4. Sensitive subject areas should be explored through appropriately sensitive or even indirect questions.
5. Respondents should always be given the opportunity to decline to answer any question.
6. Any question that a respondent is required to answer should be:
 - Within their frame of reference (in business-to-business research for example, can a single informant answer all the different questions?)
 - Relevant to them.

If this is not achieved, respondents will be forced to guess. In interpreting the responses, the researcher may not be aware of this.

7. Question concepts should be clear and understandable with as little ambiguity as possible. In general terms, a question should be interpretable in only one way
8. Questions should be clear and phrased in language appropriate to the respondent's way of thinking/talking.
9. Only one question should be asked at a time - questions containing multiple concepts (*e.g. What do you think about the colour and taste of the product?*) rarely give sensible data.
10. The status of answers should be understood by researchers. Are we asking questions that can be answered:
 - Accurately (*e.g. What was your age last birthday?*)
 - Through memory (*e.g. How many times in the last month have you done X...?*)
 - Through a best choice of options, none of which may correspond precisely to the respondent's view / behaviour (*e.g. Which of these three statements comes closest to describing your view...?*)
 - Through estimation, guesswork or even speculation.

11. Appropriate answer code options should be available that reflect the reality of the range of responses. Response codes should be:
 - Clear and understandable for the interviewer and respondent, with as little ambiguity as possible
 - Phrased in language appropriate to the respondent's way of thinking/talking.
12. The interviewer should always be able to record an answer to indicate that a question was asked, even if it has not been answered. It should always be possible to record a "don't know" response and a "not answered" response. The responses are distinct and should not normally be combined at the data collection stage. Classification questions can be seen as intrusive, and should be kept to a minimum.
13. Wherever possible space should be provided to allow the recording of comments of respondents on the topic(s) not covered by the questionnaire. This achieves two objectives:
 - It encourages respondents to feel researchers are interested in and value their views
 - It might prove beneficial to the study in illustrating aspects of the topic(s) not adequately covered in the questionnaire.
14. Consider the appropriateness of question wording to the audience, particularly where it might be difficult to be answered by, or cause offence to, minority groups or people with special needs.
15. Where appropriate standard questions or questions used on previous research should be considered. Use of such questions gives comparability across studies and can enhance the value of the data to the client.

6: Instructions to Interviewers

Guidance

1. The instructions within a questionnaire are crucial to the reliability of the data returned and should be clear and unambiguous. Such instructions help both the interviewer and the respondent.
2. Each question in a questionnaire has four key routing instructions (whether overt or implied) associated with it:
 - Who should answer the question?
For example: "Ask all" versus "Ask only those using product X at QY"
 - How is the question to be asked?
For example: "Read out" versus "Do not read out"
 - How is the answer to be recorded?
For example: "One code only" versus "code all answers mentioned"
 - Where will they go next?
For example: "Users ask QX" or "Non users skip to QY".
3. The same design principles apply whether the questionnaire is administered on paper or by a computer-assisted method.
 - In CAPI, CATI, web-based questionnaires or related computer assisted modes much of the routing will be embedded in the computer script and therefore need not be overt to the fieldworker or respondent
 - Instructions for paper questionnaires should be clear and user friendly.
4. Interviewers should not be held responsible for data collection errors arising from poor, or inadequately signposted, routing and/or interviewer instructions. Excessive complexity of routing is to be particularly discouraged. Consider including a question twice on the questionnaire in order to avoid complex routing.

7: Piloting

Guidance

1. On quantitative surveys, a small number of pilot (test) interviews should ideally be conducted to test the feasibility and appropriateness of the questionnaire. The main principle at stake is the responsibility of the researcher to collect high quality data in an objective manner, but there are also respondent issues. It may be necessary to test whether the questionnaire is compatible with the rights of respondents, particularly where sensitive issues or subjects are involved.
2. Where a client researcher is present at the pilot, the same rules apply as in other observed research.
3. Researchers should pilot questionnaires, not least to test the questionnaire for length, comprehensibility, and general good sense.
4. As a minimum, researchers should satisfy themselves as to the workability of a questionnaire through an internal pilot, that is pilot interviews with colleagues or others not involved in the research.
5. Researchers should conduct pilot interviews with a small selection of the target audience for any given research project.
6. Certain circumstances demand particularly rigorous piloting. For example:
 - When dealing with unfamiliar concepts – observation (watching pilot interviews), or qualitative pilots, can help in framing questions in the right way
 - If there are areas in the questionnaire where there are no ready-made code lists, pilots can help generate initial codes for open ended questions
 - Where it is obvious that the interview is potentially very complex or lengthy
 - Where questions are potentially contentious
 - When it is necessary to review and test alternative question strategies

8: Dealing with the results

The Rules

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| B49 | Members must ensure that research conclusions disseminated by them are clearly and adequately supported by the data. |
| B53 | Members must provide Clients with sufficient technical details to enable Clients to assess the validity of results of research projects carried out on their behalf. |
| B54 | Members must ensure that data tables include sufficient technical information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results. |
| B55 | Members must ensure that reports include sufficient information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results. |
| B56 | Members must ensure that reports and presentations clearly distinguish between facts and interpretation. |
| B57 | Members must ensure that when interpreting data they make clear which data they are using to support their interpretation |

Guidance

1. Researchers have a responsibility to deal with research results in a way that reflects the questions that were asked, rather than (mis)interpreting data in the abstract. This includes paying close retrospective attention to question phrasing, to whether the answers were prompted or unprompted, and so on.
2. Researchers also have a broader responsibility to deal with research answers in a way that respects respondents' views. This will help retain the confidence of the general public and business community, ensuring future respondent co-operation and the health and good image of the market research profession.
3. It is impossible to divorce good practice in questionnaire design – in terms of ethical and technical responsibilities – from the interpretation of the resulting data. As part of the

questionnaire design process, researchers should consider how they expect to analyse and report the results. This will aid in avoiding errors of both commission and omission.

9: Some references for help in questionnaire writing.

Questionnaire Design, Ian Brace. Kogan Page, 2004.

Consumer Market Research Handbook, Second Edition, Worcester and Downham. Chapter 5, Questionnaire Design, Jean Morton-Williams. Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978

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