



Questionnaire design guidelines  
September 2003

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>PAGE NO</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	2
<b>ETHICAL PRINCIPLES</b>	
SECTION 1: <b>GENERAL PRINICIPLES</b>	4
SECTION 2: <b>THE INTERVIEWER AND THE RESPONDENT – GETTING AND MAINTAINING CO-OPERATION</b>	4
SECTION 3: <b>MEETING THE OBJECTIVES</b>	6
SECTION 4: <b>STRUCTURING THE QUESTIONNAIRE – ITS IMPACT ON INTERVIEWERS AND RESPONDENTS</b>	6
SECTION 5: <b>WRITING THE QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	6
SECTION 6: <b>INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS</b>	7
SECTION 7: <b>PILOTING</b>	7
SECTION 8: <b>DEALING WITH THE RESULTS</b>	7
<b>GOOD PRACTICE</b>	8
SECTION 1: <b>GENERAL PRINICIPLES</b>	8
SECTION 2: <b>THE INTERVIEWER AND THE RESPONDENT – GETTING AND MAINTAINING CO-OPERATION</b>	8
SECTION 3: <b>MEETING THE OBJECTIVES</b>	9
SECTION 4: <b>STRUCTURING THE QUESTIONNAIRE – ITS IMPACT ON INTERVIEWERS AND RESPONDENTS</b>	10
SECTION 5: <b>WRITING THE QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	10
SECTION 6: <b>INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS</b>	11
SECTION 7: <b>PILOTING</b>	12
SECTION 8: <b>DEALING WITH THE RESULTS</b>	12
<b>QUESTIONNAIRE WRITING REFERENCES</b>	13

## INTRODUCTION

These Guidelines interpret and expand the existing Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct (revised July 1999). Their main aim is to promote professionalism in the conduct of research.

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

Every respondent **must** be assured that every research project is carried out in strict accordance with the Code of Conduct and that their rights of privacy are respected.

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.

## STATUS OF GUIDELINES

The following extracts from the Code apply to these guidelines.

*A16 MRS guidelines other than those published as consultative drafts, are binding on members where they indicate that actions or procedures shall or must be adhered to by members. Breaches of these conditions will be treated as breaches of the Code and may be subject to disciplinary action.*

*A17 Recommendations within such guidelines that members should behave in certain ways are advisory only.*

These guidelines are one of a series being developed by the Professional Standards Committee. For more information about the Code of Conduct and the development of guidelines contact the Standards department of the MRS. All guidelines including drafts can be found on the MRS website – [www.mrs.org.uk](http://www.mrs.org.uk)

## STRUCTURE OF GUIDELINES

The aim of this guideline is to promote good practice - both ethically and technically - **in designing quantitative questionnaires for use in quantitative surveys and recruitment for qualitative research**. Ethics are defined in most cases by reference to the relevant clauses of the MRS Code of Conduct, but sometimes by reference to what a reasonable person will consider to be good sense.

In addition there is a general responsibility to ensure that questionnaires present a positive image of market research to the community at large.

Included in the definition of quantitative questionnaires are all vehicles for structured data collection, irrespective of the mode (telephone, face to face, self-completion, and/or computer-assisted versions of these modes). Specifically, we include all survey exercises aimed at collecting structured data for aggregated statistical analysis.

This guideline is divided into two sections. The first covers ethical principles. These guidelines apply irrespective of whether an agency or clientside researcher is undertaking the research, and in most cases responsibility for their implementation lies equally with both parties. The second section deals with good practice in how to implement the principles. Each section is dealt with under the same eight headings for ease of cross-referencing.

# ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

## 1: GENERAL

### The ethics of survey research

The main ethical principles are enshrined in the MRS Code of Conduct. The overall principle is defined by:

A.2 *members shall at all times act honestly with respondents, clients (actual or potential), employers, employees, sub-contractors and the general public.*

**In relation to questionnaire design, this means that:**

- Respondents **must** be honestly and openly informed about the research they are taking part in
- Respondents **must** 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
- Undertakings to respondents (what they are told when they are recruited) **must** be honoured
- Respondents **must** be treated with respect at all times
- Research **must** respect the interests of clients
- The rights of respondents are always paramount (specifically that there **must** be no adverse effects of taking part in a survey) and take precedence over all other interests
- Research **must** be undertaken and interpreted honestly and objectively.

*(Other pertinent principles are enshrined in B.3, B.6, B.7, and B.8.)*

## 2: THE INTERVIEWER AND THE RESPONDENT – GAINING AND MAINTAINING CO-OPERATION

B.3 *Respondents' co-operation in a marketing research project is entirely voluntary at all stages. They must not be misled when being asked for co-operation.*

B.7 *Respondent must be told (normally at the beginning of the interview) if observation techniques or recording equipment are used, except where these are used in a public place.*

B.8 *Respondents must be enabled to check without difficulty the bona fides of the Researcher.*

Ethically, we **must** ensure that Code requirements of honesty and transparency are reflected in any approach to gain co-operation.

### GAINING CO-OPERATION:

1. The likely length of the interview and thus the likely time commitment from respondents **should** be clearly explained. If requested by the respondent, the likely time or range of times required **must** be given as accurately as possible. It is good practice when interviews are long that the time length is communicated at the outset. Respondents **must** not be deliberately misled regarding the likely time commitment.
2. The name of the research organisation, interviewer and respondents' rights to confidentiality **must** be clearly communicated at the outset. An assurance that the interview will or has been carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct must be communicated. Other reassurances that can be given to respondents, such as the right to withdrawal during the interview, **should** also be considered for inclusion in questionnaires.

3. The subject of the interview **must** 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 judgement in determining what could be sensitive in any given project.
4. If recording equipment is to be used the respondent **must** be told, at the time of gaining co-operation.
5. Particular attention **must** be paid to complete transparency in cases where recruitment and interviewing is being undertaken from a client-supplied database of their customers.

#### **MAINTAINING CO-OPERATION:**

1. The objectives of a survey 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.
2. 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.

*(Reference should also be made to MRS Data Collection Guidelines for related issues.)*

### 3: MEETING THE OBJECTIVES

1. Researchers **must** ensure that the objectives of a survey 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 the 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.

### 4: STRUCTURING THE QUESTIONNAIRE - ITS IMPACT ON INTERVIEWERS AND RESPONDENTS

1. The main principle is the rigour, integrity and quality of data. Neither interviewers nor respondents **should** be confused or bored by any questionnaire.
2. The guiding rule can be expressed as "doing justice to how people would normally talk about things".

### 5: WRITING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. The main principle governing the writing and phrasing of questions is one of technical best practice - it is the industry's responsibility to generate data that is as close to objectivity as is possible. Researchers must endeavour to ensure that:
  - The questions are fit for purpose and clients advised accordingly
  - The design of the questionnaire is appropriate for the audience being researched
  - Respondents are able to answer the questions in a way that reflects the view they want to express
  - The answers are capable of being interpreted in a meaningful and unambiguous way.

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. Questions **must** not lead the respondent towards a particular answer.
  4. 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 polls, and question wording is particularly crucial in opinion research. Researchers involved in conducting opinion polls for publication **should** refer to the *MRS Public Opinion Research Guidelines* (currently being drafted) for particular guidance in this area.
  5. Sensitive subject areas **should** be explored through appropriately sensitive or even indirect questions.
  6. Respondents **must** always be given the opportunity to decline to answer any question.

*(For particular issues regarding questionnaires for use when interviewing children see MRS Guidelines for Researching Children and Young People).*

## **6: INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS**

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.

## **7: PILOTING**

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.

## **8: DEALING WITH THE RESULTS**

1. Researchers have a responsibility to deal with survey 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 survey 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.

# GOOD PRACTICE

## 1: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### Technical issues

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 market research questions in the correct frame of reference.

Although this is a technical issue, it is also an ethical requirement to ensure honesty and objectivity in the collection and interpretation of survey data.

### Practical issues

Researchers **should** ensure:

- That a survey 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.

### Summary

Ethical responsibilities are non-negotiable. But we **should** be aware that researchers often need to make informed decisions about the trade-off between rigour and practicality. This guideline aims to assist in all these areas.

## 2: THE INTERVIEWER AND THE RESPONDENT - GETTING AND MAINTAINING CO-OPERATION

A good questionnaire **should** engage the respondent from the start. Technically, the quality of our 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.

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 survey?

### Practice

There are two parts to the practical exposition of these principles: the introduction and/or recruitment screener (questionnaire) and the style and content of the main questionnaire.

## INTRODUCING THE SURVEY

### Technical

1. There are occasions on which the research design requires the precise purpose of the survey to be disguised. In such cases, the introduction need not explain the precise objectives of the survey, 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". (See Section 2 Clause 3 in *Ethical Principles*.)



## DURING THE INTERVIEW

### Technical

1. Two major issues are known to impact negatively on both quality of data collected and respondents' attitude towards market research. These are
  - Excessively lengthy questionnaires
  - Repetitive questioning.
2. 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.
3. 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".
4. 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.
5. 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.

## 3: MEETING THE OBJECTIVES

### Practice

1. 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.
2. The interests of market research at large are thus served through the encouragement of:
  - The credibility of market research in the commercial environment
  - Respondent goodwill through a transparent and effective questionnaire.
3. Good practice dictates that questionnaires **should** be formally agreed to confirm that all parties are satisfied that the survey 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).

### Technical

1. 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

### Practice

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.

### Technical

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. Avoidance of non-sequiturs is recommended. Where they are unavoidable (e.g. in omnibus style questionnaires) appropriate linking phrases **should** be used.
6. To prevent a questionnaire being boring use a variety of different forms of questioning to break the routine within the questionnaire.
7. 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.
8. 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.

## 5: WRITING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

### Technical

1. 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.

2. Similarly
  - 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
  - Questions **should** be clear and phrased in language appropriate to the respondent's way of thinking/talking (which is not necessarily the same as the researcher's)
  - 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.

3. 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.
4. 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.
5. It is good practice to ensure that the interviewer is always able to record an answer to indicate that the 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.
6. 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 that we 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.
7. 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.
8. Where appropriate standard questions or questions used on previous surveys **should** be considered. Use of such questions gives comparability across studies and can enhance the value of the data to the client.

*(For standardised questions see Harmonised Questions from the Office of National Statistics, and Standardised Questions – A Review for Market Research Executives. MRS Research and Development Committee, 1984.)*

## 6: INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS

### Technical

1. 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".
2. 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.
3. 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

### Technical

1. Piloting questionnaires is unarguably good practice, not least to test the questionnaire for length, comprehensibility, and general good sense
2. 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
3. Best practice is to conduct pilot interviews with a small selection of the target audience for the survey.
4. 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

### Practice

1. 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.

## **Questionnaire Writing References**

### **Some references for help in questionnaire writing.**

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

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