

Graduate Seminar (CEM 599)



Writing Good Questions

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Do you agree with radical environmentalists who claim that 4,000 loggers should be put out of work to save 200 spotted owls ?

(Or)

Do you agree with timber company executives who argue that habitat for the few remaining spotted owls should be sacrificed so loggers can keep their jobs for the rest of their lives?



Introduction

- ❁ Avoiding emotional and biased words is only part of writing good questions.
- ❁ Issues to consider are:
 - ⦿ How specific the questions should be.
 - ⦿ Whether the questions will produce credible information.
 - ⦿ Whether the respondents are able to answer the questions.
 - ⦿ Whether respondents will be willing to provide the information.



Turning Ideas into Useful Questions

- This chapter deals with translating the idea into good questions that can be answered objectively.
- Scientists call this operationalizing. It is to set up categories of events that can be observed and measured.
- The key is “To produce useful information, one has to take time to translate the ideas that motivate the survey into good questions.”



What Kind of Information Are You Looking For?

❖ Questions can be classified as asking for one of the following types of information:

🌐 About behavior or attributes.

🌐 About attitudes or beliefs.

❖ Information needs to be clarified because:

🌐 It is easy to ask for one type of information when another type is required.

🌐 Questions of each type typically involve different degrees of measurement error.



Which Kind of Question Structure Do You Want?



All questions that can be asked are of four types.



Open Ended:



This type does not provide choices from which to select an answer.



This type has several major drawbacks.

- i. Demanding to respondents as they are asked to recall issues that may not have occurred recently at all.
- ii. Produces many different responses and only a few mentions of one topic.
- iii. Rarely provides accurate information across the whole sample.
- iv. Requires an enormous amount of time to prepare for later entry into a computer.





This type also has some advantages.

- i. Can be used when researchers have little prior knowledge about a topic.**
- ii. Can be used when the main goal is to give survey respondents a chance to state strong opinions.**
- iii. Are helpful when they immediately follow a close-ended question.**
- iv. Are desirable when respondents are asked to estimate a routine behavior and are unlikely to know an exact number.**
- v. Is well-suited to situations in which a precise piece of information is needed and can be easily recalled without a list of answer choices.**



Example of Open-ended question

What should be done to improve this community






(Or)

In your opinion, why does our community have a poverty rate that is twice the national average?





Close-ended with Ordered Choices:

-  Each choice represents a gradation of a single concept.
-  For each question, the complete range of possible answers is provided.
-  The respondent's job is to find the most appropriate place on the continuum for his answer.
-  They tend to be specific.
-  Less demanding for respondents.



Example of Close-ended with Ordered Choices

How do you feel about this statement? “This community needs more tennis courts.” (Please circle the number of your response.)

- i. Strongly Disagree
- ii. Mildly Disagree
- iii. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- iv. Mildly Agree
- v. Strongly Agree





Close-ended with Unordered Response Choices:

- ☐ **Answer choices are provided to respondents but they don't fall on a continuum.**
- ☐ **Respondents are asked to choose from among discrete, unordered categories.**
- ☐ **Should be used only when your knowledge of the subject allows you to list useful answer choices.**
- ☐ **Is usually more difficult than those with ordered answer choices.**
- ☐ **Are often used to ask people to rank items.**

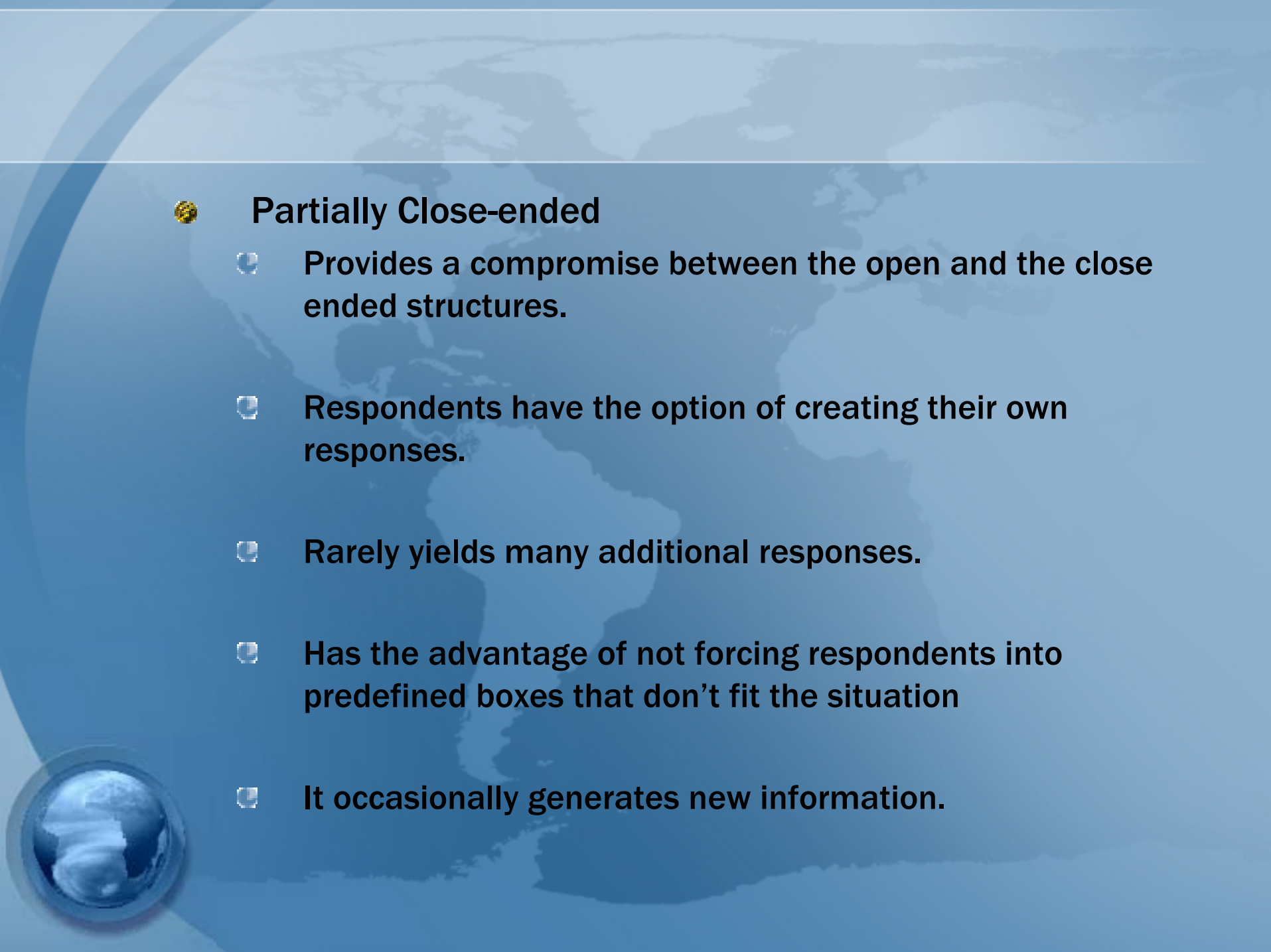


Example of Close-ended with Unordered Response Choices







Which best describes the kind of building in which you live? (Please circle the number.)

- i. A Mobile Home
- ii. A One-Family House Detached From Any House
- iii. A One-Family House Attached To At Least One Other House.
- iv. An Apartment Building.





Partially Close-ended

-  Provides a compromise between the open and the close ended structures.
 -  Respondents have the option of creating their own responses.
 -  Rarely yields many additional responses.
 -  Has the advantage of not forcing respondents into predefined boxes that don't fit the situation
 -  It occasionally generates new information.
- 

Example of Partially Close-ended Question

Which of the following areas of expenditure do you want to have the highest priority for improvement in this community?

i. Streets And Roads

ii. Sewage Treatment

iii. Parks

iv. Other (Please Specify) _____



1. Open-ended

In your opinion, what problems face U.S. agriculture in the 1990s?

- Best for focus groups or other kinds of exploratory questioning.
- Identifies range of answers that can be offered to respondents in more structured interviews later in the research process.
- Rarely yields useful data for making reliable estimates about the percent of people with particular views or characteristics.

2. Close-ended with ordered responses

Listed below are three problems some people believe exist for U.S. agriculture in the 1990s. In your opinion, how serious is each one? (Circle your answer.)

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|------|----------|------------|
| a. ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS | VERY | SOMEWHAT | NOT AT ALL |
| b. ECONOMIC PROBLEMS | VERY | SOMEWHAT | NOT AT ALL |
| c. SOCIAL PROBLEMS | VERY | SOMEWHAT | NOT AT ALL |

- Asks respondents to evaluate problems independent of each other.
- Measures how serious respondents think each individual problem is.
- Guides policy making by showing the extent to which one problem is viewed as more serious than others.

3. Close-ended with unordered responses

In your opinion, which one of the following problems facing U.S. agriculture in the 1990s is the MOST serious? (Circle the number for your response.)

- 1 ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS
- 2 ECONOMIC PROBLEMS
- 3 SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- Asks respondents to choose the single most important problem from a predefined list of alternatives (possibly those that policy makers have decided are legitimate or feasible targets for change).
- Guides policy making toward action on the problem perceived as most important.

4. Partially close-ended

In your opinion, which of the following problems facing U.S. agriculture in the 1990s is the MOST serious? (Circle the number for your response.)

- 1 ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS
- 2 ECONOMIC PROBLEMS
- 3 SOCIAL PROBLEMS
- 4 OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY) _____

- Same as in type 3, but allows respondents freedom to identify important problems that researchers and policy makers have overlooked.



Deciding Which Question Structure Is Most Useful

- ❁ None of the four question structures outlined earlier is inherently best.
- ❁ Each has merits and is better suited to providing a particular kind of information.
- ❁ Knowledge of the four alternatives is useful in helping surveyors think through what they are really trying to find out.



Does the Order of Response Choices Matter?

- Order of answer choices affects how people respond.
- In mail surveys, people tend to choose from amongst the first categories listed.
- It is the opposite in case of telephone and face-to-face interviews.
- It is known as Category Order Effect.
- Is more evident in questions with a long list of unordered categories.
- Can be a problem in questions involving abstract ideas about which people haven't thought much.



Why Measuring Attitudes and Beliefs Requires Special Attention

- Asking questions about behavior and attributes is simple.
- But not for questions on attitudes and beliefs.
- Opinions about issues are difficult to measure because they are often imprecise, change from day to day and may not be well thought out in advance of the survey.





❁ For this reason, use the following two step procedure.

❁ Avoid using extremely abstract questions that will inevitably lead to measurement error.

❁ On abstract issues that must be addressed, use different kinds of question structures so that one can rely less on any single question.



Encouraging Thoughtful Answers

- ❁ Sometimes measurement error occurs because people answer survey questions without thinking.
- ❁ This occurs when specific events are asked to be recalled over a long time period.
- ❁ Mail surveys are most affected.
- ❁ To avoid this, a series of questions are suggested that encourage respondents to recall the particular event before they answer the really important part of the question.
- ❁ This is called cognitive design.



How to Overcome Common Wording Problems

- The final step in writing good questions is to consider the exact wording.
- A perfect list of rules for writing good questions hasn't been compiled since the principles that seem sensible often get into each other's way and only confuse us.



Summary

The reason that writing questions usually takes time and many attempts is that so many things have to be taken into consideration all at once like:

- Deciding what new information is needed.
- How to structure questions.
- Whether people can accurately answer what is asked.



Thank You
Thank You

