

Designing Questionnaires

Questionnaires are often seen as easy ways to generate data – but they can be a minefield. If the data from your questionnaire is going to be a critical part of your investigation then you MUST get it right otherwise you are likely to end up with a pile of meaningless data that cannot be used to answer your research questions.

You need to think carefully about what data you will need in the form you need it before devising the questions. It's best to start this early to give yourself enough time to trial the questions with someone else - you know what sort of answer to give but the questions might (and often do) generate different sets of responses in others. To get round this, you might try to engineer the questions to narrow down the outcomes. You also need to think about how you will process the data as this will affect the form in which you need the answers to be. Unless absolutely necessary, try to avoid questions that generate vague answers - it can be very difficult to do anything with these apart from simply report them.

For example: "How do you feel tourists have affected Salisbury?" could result in an enormous variety of answer types that you would then have to try and draw conclusions from...adding the danger of your own opinions colouring the outcomes. You could get round this by then offering possible answers for respondents to choose from - but there are different ways this could be done, too. For e.g. you could ask them to score different opinions (on a scale 1-5, a great deal-not at all, etc...). These data are much more manageable and make processing much easier...but be careful of asking leading questions or answers that lead respondents in certain directions: you want their honest opinion, rather than the one you want them to support.

You also need to consider how many questionnaires to ask for each group. Unfortunately there is no simple answer as it depends on a great many things. At this level you're expected to be able to adequately investigate your question(s), so upwards of 50 would seem likely as this would generate quite a lot of data. If you're targeting different groups then don't see 50 as the TOTAL number of questionnaires: 50 equally divided between 5 groups would, of course, only give you 10 for each and this is far too small a sample at this level.

The number of respondents will further complicate the logistics because you don't want to ask too many questions of each person. This adds to the time taken to conduct each questionnaire, and time available may be an important factor for you. Also each additional question's response adds another 50 pieces of data!

Some data may be needed to judge the spread of respondents (such as age, gender...) and these, too, will need careful consideration - but may (or should) not need to be asked directly .

Finally, think carefully about how to record the data. Recording the data onto the questionnaire means having 50+ pieces of paper which then need to be collated. Having a recording table simplifies this - but you will need to be able to identify each person's answers, in order to make comparisons between the different responses. Therefore simple tally chart WILL NOT work!

There are plenty of guides available on the internet – some more complex than others, but this is quite a good one for Geography questionnaires from the RGS:

<http://www.bws-school.org.uk/Curriculum-Exams/Geography/files/03%20A%20Level/Yr12/Geographical%20Fieldwork/RGS%20Geography%20Questionnaire%20Design.pdf>