

## SurvMeth 988.206 Writing Questions for Surveys

Summer Institute  
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MTWR  
8-12:30 CDT  
9-1:30 EDT

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This short course distills research about survey questions to principles that can be applied to write survey questions that are clear and obtain reliable answers. Sessions combine lecture with group exercises and discussion. The lecture provides guidelines for writing and revising survey questions and illustrates how to revise troubled questions. Sessions consider both questions about events and behaviors and questions about subjective phenomena (such as attitudes, evaluations, and internal states).

**OTHER RELEVANT CLASSES:** This Course complements SURVMETH988.223, Introduction to Questionnaire Design; 988.222 Intermediate Questionnaire Design

### COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Introduce a structural analysis of parts of a survey question
- Introduce cognitive interviewing as a method for testing survey questions
- Describe guidelines for diagnosing problems in survey questions and writing new survey questions
- Focus on the structure and wording of survey questions, whether for interviewer-administered or self-administered instruments
- Provide an opportunity to apply the guidelines and principles during in-class exercises
- Focus on improving individual questions and sets of questions.
- Summarize research that underlies key decisions in writing survey questions.

### READINGS BEFORE CLASS:

Reading these two articles before the class will help you get the most from this short course.

\*Schaeffer, Nora Cate and Stanley Presser. 2003. "The Science of Asking Questions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29:65-88. Download from:  
<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/eprint/rU4UOoizjRXROhijkRIS/full/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.110702.110112>

\*Schaeffer, Nora Cate and Jennifer Dykema. 2020. "Advances in the Science of Asking Questions." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 46. Download from:  
<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054544>

**OTHER EXERCISES:** Exercises and discussion in class complement the lecture. There will be a brief assignment to be completed before the class and others to be completed overnight during the class. These exercises are designed to help you integrate the course material.

**READINGS:** Students are asked to do the readings. Completing the readings will greatly enhance what you learn from the course.

**COURSE CREDIT:** 1 credit is available for students who have paid tuition. If you are taking the course for credit, contact the Summer Institute and the instructor in advance. Those taking the course for credit are required to do the readings, and they must complete a substantial assignment 1 week after the end of the course.

**COMMUNICATION:** Always begin subject line of email with "Summer Institute Student," or I might not find your message.

**COURSE WEBSITE:** The course website will be on CANVAS which can be accessed through (<https://umich.instructure.com/courses/362266/>), once the website is opened. Most readings will be available there.

**INSTRUCTOR:** Schaeffer is Sewell Bascom Professor of Sociology, Emerita, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At the University of Wisconsin, she also served as Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Research in the Social Sciences and Faculty Director of the UW Survey Center. She served as President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) from 2019-2020. Her website is here: <https://sociology.wisc.edu/staff/schaeffer-nora-cate-2/>

### **Readings**

Most readings are available in Canvas. A few must be obtained using a web link because of restrictions from the publisher.

Some useful resources for instrument design can be found here:

[https://sociology.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/466/2019/12/QuexResourcesForStudents\\_V21.pdf](https://sociology.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/466/2019/12/QuexResourcesForStudents_V21.pdf)

### **Key Classic and Current Sources for Later Exploration**

Couper, Mick P. 2008. *Designing Effective Web Surveys*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth and Leah Melani Christian. 2014. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, Fourth Edition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Fowler, Floyd J. 1996. *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*. Sage.

Madans, Jennifer, Kristen Miller, Aaron Maitland and Gordon Willis, eds. 2011. *Question Evaluation Methods: Contributing to the Science of Data Quality*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Presser, Stanley, Jennifer Rothgeb, Mick Couper, Judith Lessler, Elizabeth Martin, Jean Martin, and Eleanor Singer, editors. 2004. *Questionnaire Evaluation and Testing*. New York: Wiley. [Note that volume from a 2016 conference on this topic will be out in 2017 or 2018.]

Sudman, Seymour, Norman M. Bradburn, and Norbert Schwarz. 1996. *Thinking about Answers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tourangeau, Roger, Lance J. Rips, and Kenneth Rasinski. 2000. *The Psychology of Survey Response*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Tourangeau, Roger, Frederick G. Conrad and Mick P. Couper. 2013. *The Science of Web Surveys*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Willis, Gordon. 2005. *Cognitive Interviewing: A Tool for Improving Questionnaire Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Willis, Gordon. 2015. *Analysis of the Cognitive Interview in Questionnaire Design (Understanding Qualitative Research)*. New York: Oxford.

## Course Outline

\*Priority readings are marked with \* -- I know that you don't have time for everything in a week - but try to read these articles!

### Day 1

**Lecture: Fundamentals**

**Readings: Overview, read Schaeffer & Presser 2003 and Schaeffer & Dykema 2020 if you did not read in advance**

\*Schaeffer, Nora Cate and Stanley Presser. 2003. "The Science of Asking Questions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29:65-88. Download from:  
<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/eprint/rU4UOoizjrXROhijkRIS/full/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.110702.110112>

\*Schaeffer, Nora Cate and Jennifer Dykema. 2020. "Advances in the Science of Asking Questions." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 46. Download from:  
<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054544>

\*Fowler Jr., Floyd J. and Carol Cosenza. 2008. "Writing Effective Questions." Pp. 136-60 in *International Handbook of Survey Methodology*, edited by Edith D. de Leeuw, Joop J. Hox, and Don A. Dillman. Lawrence Erlbaum.

\*Willis, Gordon B., Patricia Royston, and Deborah Bercini. 1991. "The Use of Verbal Report Methods in the Development and Testing of Survey Questionnaires." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 5:251-67.

### Day 2

**Lecture: Fundamentals, continued. Begin General Guidelines.**

**Readings: Overview (continued), Questions about Events and Behaviors**

Schaeffer, Nora Cate. 2000. "Asking Questions about Threatening Topics: A Selective Overview." Pp. 105-22 in *The Science of Self-Report: Implications for Research and Practice*, edited by Arthur A. Stone, Jaylan S. Turkkan, Christine A. Bachrach, Jared B. Jobe, Howard S. Kurtzman, and Virginia S. Cain. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

\*Schaeffer, Nora Cate and Jennifer Dykema. 2011. Questions for Surveys: Current Trends and Future Directions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 75, no. 5, pp. 909-961.  
Download from: <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/75/5/909.full.pdf+html>

\*Tourangeau, Roger. 2000. "Remembering What Happened: Memory Errors and Survey Reports." Pp. 29-48 in *The Science of Self-Report: Implications for Research and Practice*, edited by Arthur A. Stone, Jaylan S. Turkkan, Christine A. Bachrach, Jared B. Jobe, Howard S. Kurtzman, and Virginia S. Cain. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

### Day 3

**Lecture: Finish General Guidelines. Begin Events and Behaviors.**

**Readings: Overview (continued - spreading these out!)**

Redline, Cleo. 2013. "Clarifying Categorical Concepts in a Web Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 77(S1):89-105. doi: 10.1093/poq/nfs067.

\*Krosnick, Jon A. and Stanley Presser. 2010. "Question and Questionnaire Design." Pp. 263-313 in *Handbook of Survey Research, Second Edition*, edited by P. V. Marsden and J. D. Wright. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Dykema, Jennifer, Nora Cate Schaeffer, Dana Garbarski, and Michael Hout. 2020. "The Role of Question Characteristics in Designing and Evaluating Survey Questions." *Advances in Questionnaire Design, Development, Evaluation, and Testing*, edited by P. Beatty, D. Collins, L. Kaye, J. Padilla, G. Willis, and A. Wilmot. Wiley: Hoboken, NJ

## Day 4

**Lecture:** *Events and Behaviors, Questions about Subjective Things*

**Readings:** *Questions about Subjective Things*

\*Alwin, Duane F., Erin M Baumgartner, Brett A Beattie, Number of Response Categories and Reliability in Attitude Measurement. 2018. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, 6(2): 212-239, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jssam/smx025>.

Dashen, Monica and Scott Fricker. 2001. "Understanding the Cognitive Processes of Open-Ended Categorical Questions and Their Effects on Data Quality." *Journal of Official Statistics* 17(4):457-77.

\*Saris, Willem E., Melanie Revilla, Jon A. Krosnick, and Eric M. Shaeffer. 2010. "Comparing Questions With Agree/Disagree Response Options to Questions With Item-Specific Response Options." *Survey Research Methods* 4(1):61-79.

Saris, Willem and Irmtraud Gallhofer. 2007. "Estimation of the Effects of Measurement Characteristics on the Quality of Survey Questions." *Survey Research Methods* (1):29-43.