



# Good Data from Bad Questions? Impossible!

Prepared by

Mary Michaud, MPP  
State Coordinator for Local Program Evaluation  
University of Wisconsin–Extension  
May 2003

## Bad

*Interviewing a pregnant woman:*

Do you smoke?


- Yes
- No

## Better

*Interviewing a pregnant woman:*

How often are you exposed to cigarette smoke at home?

- All day, every day
- A few times a day
- A few times a week
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never



SURVEY

## Monitoring & Evaluation Program

UW-Extension  
UW Comprehensive Cancer Center  
Center for Health Policy and Program Evaluation



WISCONSIN  
DEPARTMENT OF  
NATURAL RESOURCES  
CONTROL BOARD

## Clear, meaningful questions that produce useful evaluation results.

The following is a checklist to review the quality of questions you use in evaluation instruments (surveys, interview questions, focus group protocols, etc.). It addresses some common mistakes people make when trying to construct questions. The purpose of this checklist is to help you construct or choose clear, meaningful questions that will produce useful evaluation results.

### Before your write or select questions:

- ▶ **1** Be clear about what you want to learn from your questions. Do your questions address what you really want to know? Are you asking the question because you have always asked it? Has it provided useful information in the past? If you answered NO to any of these questions, revise the question or cast it aside! Even if you have used the question over time to collect trend data, consider supplementing your approach with a more useful question.
- ▶ **2** Make sure you will USE the information. How will you use information from each question? Have your analysis plan in place before your start.
- ▶ **3** Don't reinvent the wheel. Do tested questions already exist? Ask Extension colleagues here and in other states, look at published literature, contact authors, or conduct an online search. If you're looking for tobacco-specific questions that have already been tested, check out our Build Your Own Survey tool.

- ▶ **4** Make sure you know your population. Clarify for yourself how your sample may interpret the questions you're asking. Will smokers see the questions differently than non-smokers? Will older folks read the questions differently than younger ones. This will help you avoid ambiguous questions. You don't want respondents to think to themselves, "That depends on what you mean by smoke-free," or, "Do you want me to answer as a parent or as a day care operator?"
- ▶ **5** Be sure you pilot your questions. Because you cannot always see the hidden meaning in your words, it is critical to test any evaluation tool (instrument), whether it's a questionnaire, interview questions, or a focus group protocol, to ensure the questions and response options will make sense to your respondents.

You don't want respondents to think to themselves, "That depends on what you mean by smoke-free," or, "Do you want me to answer as a parent or as a day care operator?"

### As you select or write questions:

- ▶ **6** Be specific. Is the question specific enough for your population to answer?
- ▶ **7** Ask whether your respondent will have the knowledge to answer the question. Can someone really tell you what age they were when they spoke their first word? Can you tell me whether you think the Social Security Administration should enlist a community advisory board to guide decisions about supplemental benefits to the disabled? You get the point.
- ▶ **8** Make sure the question is not "loaded" or "leading."

(list continued on page 4)



Cultural appropriateness extends beyond race and ethnicity to social class, rural vs. urban residence and gender identity.

- ▶ **9** Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- ▶ **10** Avoid double negatives.
- ▶ **11** Make sure response options that allow only one answer do not preclude other response options. For example, a question that asks one’s religion should not provide response options that include both “Christian” and “Catholic.” Ensure response options do not exclude certain respondents from answering the question. To decrease missing data and improve validity, it may be important to add options like “other” or “none of the above” to your list of response options.
  - ▶ **12** Provide reasonable ranges of variation in your response options.
  - ▶ **13** Avoid questions likely to elicit socially desirable answers. This problem can arise when respondents are not anonymous, when the question is posed among peers, or the respondent does not trust the source or possible uses of the survey.
- ▶ **14** Test the question for age, cultural and literacy appropriateness. Cultural appropriateness extends beyond race and ethnicity to social class, rural vs. urban residence and gender identity.
- ▶ **15** Consider demographic questions that will help you analyze the data in a more meaningful way.

## Tips on writing good questions

### Be specific: What are you asking people to rate?

Bad	Better
<p><b>John Anders</b>    <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent  <input type="checkbox"/> Fair  <input type="checkbox"/> Poor</p> <p><b>Ron Trudale</b>    <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent  <input type="checkbox"/> Fair  <input type="checkbox"/> Poor</p> <p><b>LouAnn Marks</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent  <input type="checkbox"/> Fair  <input type="checkbox"/> Poor</p> <p><b>Don Jacobs</b>    <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent  <input type="checkbox"/> Fair  <input type="checkbox"/> Poor</p>	<p><b>How useful were the following sessions to your work in tobacco control?</b></p> <p><b>John Anderson: <i>Winning strategies for policy work</i></b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful</p> <p><b>Ron Trudale: <i>Working effectively with youth</i></b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful</p> <p><b>LouAnn Marks: <i>Building a strong coalition</i></b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful</p> <p><b>Don Jacobs: <i>Evaluating your cessation efforts</i></b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful  <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful</p>

## Avoid double negatives.

Bad	Better
<p>Do you agree or disagree that teens should not be fined for not obeying the local outdoor smoking ordinance?</p>	<p>Teens should be fined for violating the local outdoor smoking ordinance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</li> </ul>

## Avoid “loaded” or “leading” questions.

Bad	Better
<p>Don't you think teenagers caught with cigarettes should be fined in order to prevent them from smoking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>	<p>Don't you think teenagers caught with cigarettes should be fined in order to prevent them from smoking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</li> </ul>

## Avoid questions with more than one answer.

Bad	Better																														
<p>Please tell us if today's information helped you set clear, reasonable networking goals that are within your control.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>	<p>Please list three networking goals you set today.</p> <p>Next to the goal, write one thing you plan to do in the next month to progress toward that goal.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 50%;"></th> <th style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">Three networking goals</th> <th style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">My plans to act</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Three networking goals	My plans to act	1	_____	_____		_____	_____		_____	_____	2	_____	_____		_____	_____		_____	_____	3	_____	_____		_____	_____		_____	_____
	Three networking goals	My plans to act																													
1	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													
2	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													
3	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													
	_____	_____																													

## Avoid questions that seek socially desirable answers.

Bad	Better
<p><i>Interviewing a pregnant woman:</i></p> <p>Do you smoke?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>	<p><i>Interviewing a pregnant woman:</i></p> <p>How often are you exposed to cigarette smoke at home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> All day, every day</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A few times a day</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A few times a week</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Once a month</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than once a month</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Never</li> </ul>

## Avoid jargon and acronyms.

Bad	Better
<p>Do you think the TFCWC has done an excellent, fair or poor job in informing community members about the Quitline?</p>	<p><b>Question for worksites:</b> In the past year, what steps have you taken to reduce your employees' exposure to secondhand smoke?</p> <p>(list possible steps)</p> <p><b>For community members:</b> In the past year, where did you receive the most useful information about how to quit smoking? (Please check only one response.)</p>
<p>On the political spectrum, do you consider yourself more toward the left, more toward the right, or in the middle?</p>	<p>To what party would you say your political views are most similar?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Left</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Right</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Middle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Democratic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Republican</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Independent</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Depends on the issue</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> None of the above</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Word of mouth</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Internet</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Health care provider</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Insurance plan</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Network television news</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Local Health Department</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tobacco-free Coalition of Wick County</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Public radio or public television</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I did not receive information about how to quit smoking past year</li> </ul>	

## Respondents should be competent to answer the question.

Bad	Better
<p>Was the presenter a expert in her field? <i>or</i> Was the presenter knowledgeable about the subject?</p>	<p>Did the presenter effectively answer questions from the class?</p>

## Response options should provide reasonable ranges.

Bad	Better
<p>What do you think is the effect on one's health of second-hand smoke?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Harmless</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat negative</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Very Bad</li> </ul>	<p>Breathing secondhand smoke is...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Very harmful to one's health</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat harmful to one's health</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not very harmful to one's health</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not at all harmful to one's health</li> </ul>
<p>What is your annual income?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> &lt; \$5,000</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> \$5,000-70,000</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> \$70,000 or over</li> </ul>	<p>What category best represents your annual household income?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$20,000</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between \$20,000 and \$39,999</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between \$40,000 and \$59,999</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between \$60,000 and \$79,999</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between \$80,000 and \$99,999</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> \$100,000 or more</li> </ul>

**“Anchor” your questions in specific behaviors.**

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Better</i>
<p><b>Do you emphasize leadership in your local FACT chapter?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>	<p><b>How often do you review progress in leadership skills with members of your local Fight Against Corporate Tobacco (FACT) Youth Group?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Annually</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quarterly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monthly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weekly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Never</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you provide your employees with information on how to quit smoking?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No</li> </ul>	<p><b>How often do provide your employees with information on how to quit smoking?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Annually</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quarterly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monthly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weekly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Never</li> </ul> <p><b>What information do you provide?</b> (list of possible pieces of information)</p>

**Do response options make sense? Make sure choosing one response doesn’t preclude another.**

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Better</i>
<p><b>What is your religion?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Christian</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Catholic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lutheran</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Jewish</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Episcopalian</li> </ul>	<p><b>What is your religion?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Catholic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lutheran</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Jewish</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Episcopalian</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Islamic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> None of the above</li> </ul>

**Are questions appropriate to culture, age and literacy level?**

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Better</i>
<p><b>Who buys the groceries in your family?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Mom</li> <li>B Dad</li> <li>C Other</li> </ul>	<p><b>Please circle the person who most often purchases the groceries for your household.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Head of household</li> <li>B Child/teenager</li> <li>C Grandparents</li> <li>D Other relatives</li> <li>E A neighbor</li> <li>F Other</li> </ul>



# Good Data from Bad Questions? Impossible!

## **Good Data from Bad Questions? Impossible!**

[www.uwex.edu/ces/tobaccoeval](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/tobaccoeval)

Prepared by Mary Michaud, MPP, State  
Coordinator for Local Program Evaluation,  
University of Wisconsin–Cooperative Extension

University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension  
Technical Assistance in Local Program Evaluation  
as part of the Wisconsin Tobacco Control Board  
Monitoring and Evaluation Program

May 2003



Copyright 2003, Board of Regents of the University of  
Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.