



## Answer Categories and the Target Audience

**I want to survey farmers in my county about their perceptions about Lyme disease. In the following question, which answer categories are best: numbers, words, or something else?**

*How great a threat is Lyme disease?*

IN PA	??	??	??	??	??
IN YOUR COUNTY	??	??	??	??	??
WITHIN 1 MILE OF YOUR FARM	??	??	??	??	??

Researchers debate this complex issue (Miller, 1991; Sudman and Bradburn, 1982). You need to remember your goal: to create an array of categories increasing (or decreasing) in intensity in order to discriminate levels of intensity *in the group* you are measuring.

**When numbers are used**, they are also accompanied with terms anchored on each side to define the extremes of intensity.

For example:

<i>very low</i>					<i>very high</i>
1	2	3	4	5	

**Why use numbers?** First, after a number is circled, it can be loaded on a computer, skipping the coding step and enhancing reliability. Second, numbers are symbols used widely in our society and people understand that numbers suggest that each answer is larger (or smaller) than the one previous. Third, numbers give an appearance of objectivity. And fourth, they give the appearance that the answers have equal intensity or distance between them. Numbers are avoided however, for many reasons. One reason is that numbers are symbols lacking inherent meaning. Second, they are open to interpretation. Third, numbers appear impersonal, leading to a lack of seriousness in completing the question and threatening validity. Finally, because the concept of equal intensity or distance between categories is strongly disputed, numbers are avoided.

**When words are used**, each one can demonstrate an increasing (or decreasing) level of intensity and the first and last can define the extremes of intensity. There is no need for anchors.

For example:

VERY LOW	LOW	MODERATE	HIGH	VERY HIGH
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**Why use words?** First, words are more prevalent as a means of communication among people in society. Second, words are more easily interpreted than numbers. Words are not without flaws either. First, like numbers, they are open to interpretation. Second, if a large set of categories are needed (i.e., above five), it can be a struggle to find words to represent an increasing (or decreasing) progression. Third, words may need coding for computer use.



The next time you pre-test an evaluation include another criteria for consideration: **what does your target audience think?**

Centre County farmers provided interesting new data on this basic question of answer categories. Pre-testing a survey on 20 farms, one specialist tested three types of answer categories: numbers, words, and boxes. Each type was distributed randomly among the farmers, and following the survey, the farmers were asked to discuss it relative to the two alternative type answer categories.

The specialist found that nearly all farmers rejected the use of numbers. Although these respondents preferred boxes as a faster method, strikingly, *they recommended words because words forced them to slow down and consider each answer category more carefully.*

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