



Question Order

Does question order in a survey change results?

Question sequence requires careful thought to reduce the likelihood of bias in a personal interview, telephone survey, focus group, or mail questionnaire. Order can affect results when a general question and a more specific question are asked in sequence. Take this example in a county **Needs**

Assessment:

[Specific] *All things considered, how would you describe the quality of the water at your residence? (circle number)*

1. *very poor*
2. *poor*
3. *good*
4. *very good*
5. *never thought about it*

[General] *Taken as a whole, how would you describe your community as a place to live? (circle number)*

1. *very unsatisfactory*
2. *unsatisfactory*
3. *not really sure*
4. *satisfactory*
5. *very satisfactory*

Research using “split-ballot experiments,” in which the order of questions is rotated, suggests that results from a general question are likely to be affected depending on whether it comes before or after a specific question. In the examples above, placing the general question first implies many things about a community (of which water quality is only one); placing the general question second implies that since a question on water quality has been asked first, it is not included as part of the general question.

To apply this concept to a **Program Evaluation**, a typical example occurs when there are first a series of specific questions about the program (e.g., the instructor, overheads, a hands-on exercise) followed by a general question:

Overall, how useful was this workshop to you?

If you want to use a question that provides an overall rating, you can reduce the likelihood of biasing the results if you place it at the *beginning* of your evaluation, before any specific questions.

For further reading consult: Schuman, H. & Presser, S. (1981). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys*. New York: Academic Press, Inc.

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