

# Question Wording



Pierre-Auguste Renoir: The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette (1876)



# Question Wording

## 1. Avoid the loaded question

- The loaded question provides only one reasonable response for the subject.
  - The Surgeon General states that cigarette smoking is harmful to one's health. Do you encourage your children to smoke cigarettes?

Note: Sometimes one might deliberately want to bias wording to help balance a controversial topic:

- Do you support cigarette advertising in foreign countries to promote job creation in the U.S.?



# Question Wording

## 2. Avoid using inflammatory words

- Inflammatory words bias the response.
  - Do you think rude people should be able to smoke their cigarettes while attending a baseball game?

## 3. Avoid being too folksy

- Informal language assumes knowledge and familiarity.
  - Ok, let's look at some questions on smoking cigarettes.



# Question Wording

## 4. Avoid using slang terms

- Slang assumes knowledge and familiarity.
  - Would you hang with a cigarette smoker?

## 5. Avoid using technical terms

- Most persons do not know the meaning of technical terms.
  - Approximately how many PCP's are inhaled from smoking one cigarette?



# Question Wording

## 6. Use precise wording

- Imprecision can create misunderstanding.
  - Should tobacco be banned?

## 7. Be precise regarding time

- Imprecision can create misunderstanding.
  - Have you ever smoked cigarettes?  
[meaning “as a habit” rather than “ever tried one”]



# Question Wording

## 8. Use accurate facts

- Inaccuracy distorts the meaning of the question.
  - How concerned are you about the possibility of contracting HIV from smoking cigarettes?

## 9. Do not assume knowledge or behavior

- The assumed knowledge or behavior should be asked as a prior question.
  - Do you agree with the Surgeon General's latest report on cigarette smoking?



# Question Wording

## 10. Use correct grammar

- Inaccuracy distorts the meaning of the question.
  - Should cigarette smoking be gotten done with?

## 11. Avoid double negatives

- Double negatives create confusion about meaning.
  - Do you disagree that cigarette smoking is disagreeable?



# Question Wording

## 12. Avoid the double-barreled question

- The word “and” can create two questions in one.
  - Do you think that cigarette smoking is bad for your health and well-being?

This error is very common in questionnaire wording. Be very skeptical of the use of “and” in question wording



# Question Wording

## 13. Response categories should match the question

- Using a common set of response categories can create misunderstandings.
  - Should the national health care bill include a \$1.00 tax increase on a pack of cigarettes?
    1. never
    2. sometimes
    3. often
    4. always



# Question Wording

## 14. Response categories should be mutually exclusive

- Inclusive response categories create confusion about how to mark the item.
  - How much do you spend on cigarettes each week?
    1. Do not smoke
    2. less than \$10
    3. \$10 to \$15
    4. \$15 or more



## Question Wording

### **15. Use a time frame to measure future behavior**

- An open time frame allows for too many possibilities.
  - Wrong: Will you ever smoke a cigarette?
  - Right: Do you intend to smoke a cigarette with the next six weeks?



# Question Wording

## 16. Avoid determinism

- Deterministic questions do not leave open the possibility for changes or exceptions.
  - Is cigarette smoking in public places ever acceptable?

## 17. Provide clear instructions on responses

- Ambiguity will create confusion about how to respond.
  - Please rate your opinion about smoking cigarettes on a scale of 1 to 10.



# Question Wording

## 18. Avoid specifying too many response alternatives in the question

- Long, complex questions create confusion.
  - Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that cigarette is harmful to one's health?



# Question Wording

## 19. Split complex questions into two parts

- Questions should be easy to answer.
  - Wrong: What percentage of your weekly income do you spend on cigarettes?
  - Right:
    - What was your approximate total income before taxes in 2008?
    - Approximately how much money do you spend on cigarettes each week?



## Question Wording

### **20. Include “Don’t Know” only when appropriate**

- Too much use of this response option can create problems when interpreting the data.
- Dr. Sapp advises to use a “don’t know” response category when requesting factual information (e.g., Do your children smoke cigarettes?), but not when requesting opinions (e.g., Should billboard advertisements for cigarettes be banned?).



# Question Wording

## 21. Avoid lists longer than five items

- Questions should be easy to answer.
  - Please rank in order of importance the following 15 reasons for avoiding cigarette smoking?

## 22. Avoid too much abstraction

- Too much abstraction can create confusion.
  - Does cigarette smoking erode the moral integrity of the American citizenry?



# Question Wording

## 23. Be simple without being condescending

- Questions should respect the intelligence of the respondent.
  - Should the Surgeon General (i.e., the head person in charge of health promotion) ban cigarette smoking?

## Other Notes

- Avoid lengthy questions.
- Special instructions to interviewers should be clear and easy to follow.

**Questions?**