

## The Social Study Style Guide

### General remarks on the data collection mode of the panel

The Social Study (TSS) has two types of panelists: those using the online panel infrastructure and those using paper-and-pencil questionnaires. The design and content of the questionnaires must suit both modes, leading to restrictions on allowed question types and answer categories:

- Online questionnaires must be technically feasible for panelists with minimal technology, such as a portable phone with a small vertical screen and internet access.
- Offline questionnaires restrict the number of questions with open-answer category boxes.
- Excessive routing of questions with filters is discouraged for offline panelists, due to its inconvenience.

### Predefined questionnaire design choices

TSS strives to uphold a uniform layout for both online and offline questionnaires, prioritizing a mobile-first approach for online surveys and adhering to survey methodological standards. Consequently, specific design elements in commissioned questionnaires, such as visual and page organization, and allowable question types and answer categories, remain fixed. While intentional deviations from recommendations and choices are allowed (see below), they must be formally requested and justified.

### The visual and page organization of questions and answer categories

- To avoid visibility issues on certain devices and reduce the risk of missed responses, online questionnaires should **vertically organize** single and multiple-choice questions and answer categories as separate text blocks.
- Questions and answer categories must start with a capital letter and sentences must end with a full stop.
- For survey consistency, **Verdana Geneva** and Gotham Light (sans-serif) with uniform spacing is used in all TSS surveys.
- Answer categories will be adequately spaced to prevent click or fill-in errors.
- Two-column layouts for questions on a single page are prohibited. This is to enhance the user experience for online panelists, as it can be more cumbersome on certain devices with horizontal scrolling. Questions are presented sequentially rather than side by side.
- Generally, online surveys feature only one question per page. Exceptions allow for up to five related questions on the same page, while unrelated questions must be placed on separate pages to maintain thematic coherence.
- Consistency in surveys is maintained by emphasizing words with underlined letters. To ensure visual clarity and consistency, no colors, symbols, or shading are allowed.
- Generally, answers are not mandatory, and panelists can skip questions. Panelists will not be forced to answer probing questions unless deemed necessary by the applicant, such as for routing or format checks. Online surveys include a back

button for compatibility with offline panelists. **Applicants who wish to make use of probing questions should submit their arguments to the TSS staff.**

- Routing questions precede filter execution to prevent motivated underreporting. Due to the offline population using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, the number of routing questions should be minimized.
- Visual and conceptual midpoints (e.g., 'neither, nor...') should align visually by inserting a white line to separate non-substantive (i.e., 'I don't know' and 'Does not apply') from substantive answer categories.<sup>1</sup>
- Attention or abuse checks may be incorporated into TSS questionnaires (e.g. 2+2=?).

Figure 1: Lay-out of TSS questionnaires



Heeft u de voorbije zes maanden een film bekeken in een bioscoop of in een andere zaal (bijvoorbeeld filmmuseum, filmclub, cultuurcentrum of een lokaal waar sporadisch films worden vertoond)?

Ja

Nee

TERUG

VERDER

### Accepted types of questions and answer categories

- Before submitting questions to TSS Survey Management, verify whether your questions have been previously implemented in a TSS survey. **If already used, provide justification for their reimplementation.**
- When a list of items is presented, and panelists must select an appropriate item from a 'check all that apply' list, response order effects may occur. To mitigate this, answer categories for each individual item (e.g., yes/no) are used to prevent bias based on the order in which options are presented.
- To make online questionnaires mobile-friendly, other questions with multiple statements and answer categories should be broken down into single questions with separate answer categories in a vertical lay-out. All items in the example below should receive their own answer categories and not presented in one battery with one set of answer categories.

Example: How strongly do you agree to the following statements on the news (media, social media,...)?

1. Most news can be trusted.
2. I think I can trust most of the news I consume.
3. Most news on social media can be trusted.
4. I think I can trust news on social media I consume.

<sup>1</sup> 'I don't know' with survey code -77 and 'Does not apply' with survey code -88. The survey code -99 cannot be used in the survey as it is reserved to identify panelists who skip a specific question.

- For the offline questionnaire, a vertical layout is discouraged due to increased panelist workload.
- Specific instructions for filling in a question should be visually positioned where panelists will encounter them (e.g., instructions for the 'other' category should be provided alongside the 'other' category). Poor placement may lead to panelists overlooking or becoming confused by the instructions.
- The 'I don't know' answer category is allowed in knowledge-related questions, **provided the applicant justifies its inclusion** (e.g., for replicating past research or cross-national studies).
- TSS recommends answer categories that are verbally labeled (e.g., 'high' instead of number 2), logically ordered (e.g., 'very good' to 'very bad'), and fully written-out options without the use of numbers. If numerical representation is necessary, positive numerical answer categories are preferred. Avoid using numbers when vague quantifiers like 'many' are employed.
- All questions should be complete sentences.
- The use of open-ended questions should be limited due to increased response time and coding requirements to safeguard panelist identity. **Applicants must provide a coding scheme for open questions and specify answer box sizes.** Generally, a single box for one answer is preferred, accompanied by helpful information (e.g., 'hours per day (0-24)'). Open-ended questions are appropriate when specific answers are challenging, to avoid excessive answer categories or leading responses, to validate a question, understand panelist choices, or encourage additional open-ended information.
- Sliders (visual analog scales) and drag-and-drop answer categories are not utilized due to their potential difficulty for panelists, potential survey time prolongation, and challenges in implementation and processing in the offline questionnaire.
- Maintain a consistent positive direction for answer categories throughout the survey (e.g., 'strongly disagree to strongly agree'). Changing the direction could confuse panelists. However, questions can be phrased positively or negatively as balanced scales are permitted.
- Specific items in TSS surveys can be randomized for online panelists. **If applicants wish to randomize particular questions, they should provide their arguments for doing so.**
- Survey experiments are permitted, but their purpose must be transparently disclosed to the TSS staff. **Applicants must provide their rationale and the experimental functionalities intended for the inclusion of their survey experiment.**



Figure 2: Example question in TSS

**Zou u zichzelf omschrijven als een man, een vrouw, of op een andere manier?**

*Ik identificeer mezelf als ...*

Een man

Een vrouw

Ik antwoord liever niet

Andere (omschrijf)

**VERDER**



## Recommendations on the design of questions and answer categories

Alongside the established questionnaire design choices, we offer recommendations for applicants. These encompass guidance on question wording, response categories, handling open-ended questions, and the consideration of time-related aspects.

### Recommendations on question wording

	Unfavorable example	Favorable example
1. Use clear and simple language, avoiding unfamiliar words, abbreviations, and ambiguous terms. Opt for concrete and specific wording. We recommend B1 level language. <sup>2</sup>	<p>Agree-disagree question: “Do you trust FEDPOL?”</p> <p>Yes-no question: “Were you born in BE?”</p>	<p>Agree-disagree question: “Do you trust the national police?”</p> <p>Yes-no question: “Were you born in Belgium?”</p>
2. Avoid using two-barreled questions (i.e. questions that cover more than one topic)	<p>Agree-disagree question: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life and your relationship with your current partner nowadays?”</p>	<p>Agree-disagree question: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?”</p> <p>Not at all satisfied-completely satisfied question: “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your current partner?”</p>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-2-cefr-33-common-reference-levels-self-assessment-grid> ; <https://www.ishetb1.nl>

<p>3. Avoid hypothetical questions that require panelists to imagine unrealistic scenarios.</p>	<p>Asking: “Suppose you are a Protestant, would you consider to...”</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>4. Avoid using negations (e.g. 'no' and 'none') and double negations in questions.</p>	<p>Agree-disagree question: “People like me are being systematically neglected, whereas other groups do not receive more than they deserve.”</p>	<p>Agree-disagree question: “People like me are being systematically neglected, whereas other groups receive more than they deserve.”</p>
<p>5. Avoid presuppositions and leading questions; provide a range of answer categories or use an introductory statement for panelist responses to ask for their level of (dis)agreement.</p>	<p>Yes-no question: “Women do not like to watch football matches on the television. Do you like to watch football matches on the television?”</p> <p>Yes-no question: “Most people think that climate change is not real. Do you think that climate change is real?”</p>	<p>Yes-no question: “Some people like to watch football matches on the television. Other people do not like to watch football matches on the television. Do you like to watch football matches on the television?”</p> <p>Yes-no question: “Some people think that climate change is not real. Other people think that climate change is real. Do you think that climate change is real?”</p> <p>Recommended use of question style: “Do you favor or oppose,” “how satisfied or dissatisfied are you?,” “To what extent...,” “How concerned, if at all.”</p>
<p>6. Consider whether each question is relevant to every panelist; avoid presenting questions that only apply to specific individuals.</p>	<p>“To which branch of Christianity do you belong?”</p>	<p>Routing of questions with filter questions or ‘not applicable’ may solve these problems. If respondents fail to answer a specific question crucial for routing, review the subsequent routing of questions</p>



## Recommendations of answer categories

	Unfavorable example	Favorable example
1. If there is a natural unit, such as days or months, use it as the answer category.	Very often to never question: “During the last 7 days, how often did you do in your free time vigorous physical activities like heavy lifting, digging, aerobics, or fast bicycling?”	“During the last 7 days, on how many days did you do in your free time vigorous physical activities like heavy lifting, digging, aerobics, or fast bicycling?” 0-7 days
2. Avoid using generic labels like 'agree' or 'satisfied' if they don't capture the question's essence. Provide response categories specific to the item, clearly connected to the posed question.	“All things considered, do you agree that you are satisfied with the current economic situation in the country?”	Do not offer answer categories here in the 'agree-disagree' format but in the 'satisfied-dissatisfied' format): “All things considered, how satisfied are you with the current economic situation in the country?”
3. Choose either unipolar (e.g., 'very successful' to 'not at all successful'(zero point)) or bipolar scales (e.g., 'very likely', 'neither, nor' (zero point) to 'very unlikely') for a question. Avoid mixing them, as it creates ambiguity without a clear zero point.	“To what extent do you find the following situations unjust or just? 1. That only people in need are helped to cover their basic needs.”  “Very unjust, somewhat unjust, somewhat just, not just at all.” There are two zero points here ('not just at all' and between 'somewhat unjust' and 'somewhat just').	“To what extent do you find the following situations unjust or just? 1. That only people in need are helped to cover their basic needs.”  “Very unjust, somewhat unjust, not at all unjust.” There is only one zero point here: “not at all unjust.”  Alternatively, you could choose: “Very unjust, somewhat unjust, neither unjust, nor just, somewhat just, very just.”
4. Ensure equal conceptual distance between answer categories.	Distances between 'fair' and 'poor,' and 'excellent' and 'very good' in the scale 'excellent, very good, good, fair and poor' are not the same. The first distance is longer than the second distance.	Use 'very good, good, somewhat good and not good at all' instead.
5. Adjust answer categories for questions about the intensity of daily activities based on known population frequencies. If the frequency is	“How many hours did you listen to the radio in the past week” with answer categories like 'less than one	You could use categories based on population frequencies or use an open category.

unknown, consider using an open-ended question to avoid bias in responses.	hour, one hour, more than one hour'		
	or 'less than 30 minutes, 30 minutes, one hour, more than one hour'.		
6. Options for answer categories are:	/	/	/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Very...; somewhat...; slightly...; and not at all...'</li> <li>• 'Very...; somewhat...; neutral; somewhat...; very...'</li> <li>• 'Very...; somewhat...; average (or neither, nor...); somewhat...; very...'</li> <li>• The choice of an answer category 'neutral' or 'neither, nor' as a midpoint of a scale is a choice of the applicant.</li> </ul>			
7. Determine if your question(s) are multiple choice or not	/	/	/
8. Utilize response categories that are mutually exclusive and cover all possible responses. The inclusion of an 'other' category is permissible.	/	/	/

## Recommendations on open-ended questions

	Unfavorable example	Favorable example
1. Clearly phrase open-ended questions and specify the response unit (e.g., years or hours).	"When did you see a film in a cinema or in another venue?"	"How many times in the past six months have you watched a film in a cinema or in another venue?"
2. Avoid asking panelists to sum or calculate their responses.	<p>"How many hours between 9am and 9pm do you listen to the radio?"</p> <p>"How many hours between 9am and 9pm do you watch television?"</p> <p>"How many hours between 9am and 9pm do you watch Youtube? Answers should not exceed 12."</p> <p>The questions have three boxes that should add up to 12, but if left to the panelists this may not be calculated correctly.</p>	Let the computer add up the hours

3. Do not include more than one topic in an open question.	“How many times in the past six months have you watched a film and met friends in a cinema or in another venue?”	Split the question in two questions
4. Specify the length of the answer (determined by an answer box). <b>This needs to be discussed with the TSS Survey Management.</b>	/	/
5. Encourage panelists to respond by explaining the importance of open questions. Avoid influencing answers, but use prompts like 'Can you tell me more about that?'	“Please describe your experience as an international student during COVID-19.”	‘Please describe your experience as an international student during COVID-19. This question is crucial for university departments to improve their services.’  After filling in this question, you can offer the following question: ‘Can you tell me more about your experience?’

### Recommendations on the use of time

Short time specifications (e.g., days, months) should be chosen when questions are about:

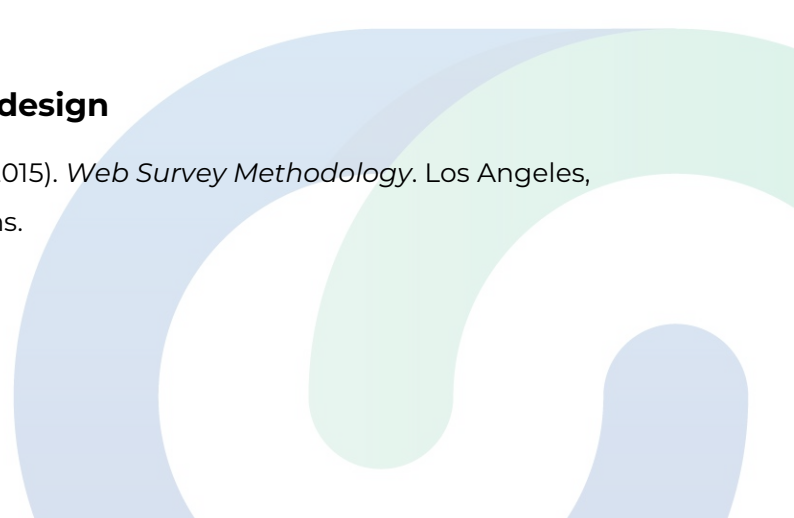
- 1) Daily activities without relevance (e.g., ‘How many times did you drink water in the last 5 days?’).
- 2) Frequent events with no fixed repetition (e.g., ‘How many times did you talk with your friends in the last 3 days?’)
- 3) Regular events with a fixed repetition (e.g., ‘How many times have you been to the grocery store in the last 3 months?’).
- 4) Asking about frequent events, like ‘How many hours do you watch television in a week,’ using specific numbers may introduce bias toward certain numbers (e.g., 10, 25, etc.).

Longer time specifications (e.g., years) are useful when questions are about:

- 1) Easy to remember, rare or irregular life events (e.g. ‘How many times have you travelled abroad in the last 2 years?’).

### Useful references on questionnaire design

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