



The  
Ultimate  
Guide to  
**Effective  
Data  
Collection**



# The Ultimate Guide to **Effective Data Collection**

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# Introduction: Why Data Quality is Crucial

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“In God we trust.  
All others must  
bring data.”

- *W. Edwards Deming*

Statistician, professor, author,  
lecturer and consultant

Deming describes the importance that organisations, funders, and people in general give to data today. Data has become fundamental in nearly every aspect of life.

Businesses and corporates use data to make better decisions, increase profits, grow revenues and improve efficiency. Organizations such as hedge funds, stock brokers and investment banks — where a split second delay in decision making can lead to

huge losses — have been stalwarts in using data to make the smallest decisions.

In addition, the development and policy spaces have seen the use of data to drive decision making and increase impact. Non-profit and government organisations are using data to inform decisions, such as how much money to invest in a particular project or how to improve impact per dollar spent.

With the growing importance placed on data, surveys have become an indispensable tool for every organization, from billion-dollar tech companies to rural nonprofits.

Creating a survey seems simple — just ask a few simple questions, and you'll get back data to solve your every problem. However, designing a survey correctly takes time and knowledge. A poorly-designed survey will lead to useless data, wasting your time and money. As computer scientists say, "Garbage in, garbage out."

## Case Study

In 1936, the [Literary Digest](#) polled 2.4 million people on the upcoming U.S. presidential election. After conducting one of the largest and most expensive polls in history, the *Literary Digest* predicted that Alfred Landon would win the election 57% to 43% against the incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the same time, George Gallup polled around 50,000 people and predicted a win for Roosevelt.

The actual results of the election were 62% for Roosevelt against 38% for Landon. The *Literary Digest* poll's prediction had an error of 19%, the largest error in the history of major public opinion polls in the U.S.

The explanation for this error? Survey design. Though Gallup surveyed only 2% of the people that the *Literary Digest* did, Gallup's data was far more accurate because he designed the survey and sampled the population more effectively.

### *Designing a survey involves several considerations:*

- What is the purpose of your survey? What data are you looking to collect?
- How can you best collect that data? What sort of survey and research methodology should you use?

- How should you write the questions in your survey?
- Who should you survey?

This ebook is designed to take you through these questions and help you design a survey that will give you high-quality data. Chapter 1 will help you think through the purpose, outcomes and indicators of your survey. Chapters 2 and 3 will help you determine what data collection method you should use, as well as whether you need a qualitative or quantitative survey. Chapters 4-8 address writing the questions in your survey — what you want to ask and best practices around how to ask it. Lastly, Chapter 9 covers all aspects of sampling your population — sampling methods, best practices, and a quick sample size formula.

# Chapter 1:

## Survey Design: Creating Your Research Question, Outcomes and Indicators

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The most important part of your survey is determining your purpose — why are you conducting this survey and what do you want to learn?

Setting your research question, outcomes and indicators clearly makes writing the rest of your survey far simpler. Moreover, it ensures that everyone in your organization is on the same page about your survey.

This chapter will show how to build your research question, outcomes and indicators through an exploration of two case studies.

## Determining Your Research Question

Before you start collecting data, it is important to figure out your research question. As part of this process, you also should think broadly about who you can survey.

To fully formulate your research question, you should be able to answer three questions:

1. What is my research question?
2. Why am I collecting this information?
3. Who can I collect this data from?

### Tool Tip

The people you are collecting data from are called the “target population” or “sample”.

### Case Study #1

You run an education NGO, which works on a teacher training program across 1500 schools in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. As part of your program, your team trains teachers on how to improve your students’ reading skills.

1. What is the research question behind collecting data on the impact of the programme?

How has my NGO improved the teaching skills of the teachers we work with, and how has this improved student reading skills?

2. Why am I collecting this information?

To measure the impact of my NGO’s programme so I can compare it to my other programmes and communicate its impact to my funders.

3. Who can I collect data from?

I can collect data from the students and teachers where the NGO works.

### Case Study #2

Your NGO works with women’s SHGs from a district in Jharkhand. Your model for change is two fold – you directly impact the SHGs you work with by helping them fundraise, which in turn empowers women who participate in the SHGs.

1. What is the research question behind collecting data on the impact of the programme?

How has my NGO contributed to increasing the funding of the SHGs we work with?

2. Why am I collecting this information?

To measure the impact of my Funding Well programme.

3. Who can I collect data from?

I can collect data from the SHGs that my NGO works with and the families of the members of the SHGs. I can also collect data on SHG funding from my program officers.

### Tool Tip

The second question might seem unnecessary. After all, it doesn’t directly go into your research question. However, it is an essential part of the survey design process. If you cannot fully answer why you are conducting your survey, you are not ready to start your survey.

Once you can answer these three questions for your own survey, you have figured out your research question and target population.

## Determining Your Outcomes

Once you have determined a research question, you can create the set of outcomes for your survey.

An outcome is something that you can track to measure data on your research question. Outcomes should be feasibly measurable.

### Case Study #1

You run an education NGO, which works on a teacher training program across 1500 schools in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. As part of your program, your team trains teachers on how to improve your students' reading skills.

#### *Research Question*

How has my NGO improved the teaching skills of the teachers we work with, and how has this improved student reading skills?

#### *Outcomes*

Change in teachers' teaching skills  
Change in students' reading skills

### Case Study #2

Your NGO works with women's SHGs from a district in Jharkhand. Your model for change is two fold – you directly impact the SHGs you work with by helping them fundraise, which in turn empowers women who participate in the SHGs.

#### *Research Question*

How has my NGO contributed to increasing the funding of the SHGs we work with?

#### *Outcomes*

- Change in the funds raised by the SHGs before and after they entered my programme
- Empowerment of the women in the district

## Determining Your Indicators

Once you have determined your set of outcomes, you can create the indicators for each outcome.

An indicator is a data point (or data points) that measure an outcome. Indicators must be measurable (using either qualitative or quantitative data) within the framework of your survey.

### Case Study #1

You run an education NGO, which works on a teacher training program across 1500 schools in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. As part of your program, your team trains teachers on how to improve your students' reading skills.

#### *Research Question*

How has my NGO improved the teaching skills of the teachers we work with, and how has this improved student reading skills?

#### *Outcomes*

Change in teachers' teaching skills  
Change in students' reading skills

#### *Indicators*

##### **Measuring change in teachers' teaching skills:**

- Conduct written assessments over time.
- Observe the teachers' classes at intervals.
- Take qualitative feedback from students regarding the teachers' classes.

- Ask the teachers to reflect on their improvement over time.

### **Measuring change in students' reading skills:**

- Track students' homework assignments.
- Track scores on reading exams.
- Conduct reading assessments at intervals.
- Ask students to reflect on their reading improvement over time.

### **Case Study #2**

Your NGO works with women's SHGs from a district in Jharkhand. Your model for change is two fold – you directly impact the SHGs you work with by helping them fundraise, which in turn empowers women who participate in the SHGs.

### ***Research Question***

How has my NGO contributed to increasing the funding of the SHGs we work with?

### ***Outcomes***

- Change in the funds raised by the SHGs before and after they entered my programme
- Empowerment of the women in the district

### ***Indicators***

- Measure funds raised by SHGs each month, starting when they enter your programme
- Take qualitative feedback from women on whether they feel empowered, each month
- Measure women's likelihood to make household decisions, each month

After creating your research question, outcomes and indicators, you will know exactly what data you need to collect. From there, it is much easier to design the rest of your survey.

# Chapter 2:

## Data Collection Methods

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Once you know what data you want to collect, it is important to figure out which data collection method you will use. Each method has its own advantages, disadvantages and use cases.

### **Tool Tip**

Any research is only as good as the data that drives it, so choosing the right method of data collection can make all the difference.

### **Observation**

Seeing is believing, they say. Making direct observations, when the situation allows for it, is a very quick and effective way of collecting data with minimal intrusion. Establishing the right mechanism for making the observation is all you need.

### ***Advantages***

- Non-responsive sample subjects are a non-issue when you are simply making direct observations.
- This mode does not require a very extensive and well-tailored training regime for the survey workforce.
- It is not as time-consuming as the other modes that we will be discussing below.

- Infrastructure requirement and preparation time are minimal.

### ***Disadvantages***

- Heavy reliance on experts who must know what to observe and how to interpret the observations once the data collection is done.
- There is the possibility of missing out on the complete picture due to the lack of direct interaction with sample subjects.

### ***Use Case***

Making direct observations can be a good way of collecting information about mechanical, orderly tasks, like checking the number of manual interventions required in a day to keep an assembly line functioning smoothly.

## **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires, as we consider them here, are stand-alone instruments for data collection that are administered to the sample subjects either through mail, phone or online. They have long been one of the most popular data collection methods.

### ***Advantages***

- Questionnaires give the researchers an opportunity to carefully structure and formulate the data collection plan with precision.
- Respondents can take these questionnaires at a convenient time and think about the answers at their own pace.
- The reach is theoretically limitless. The questionnaire can reach every corner of the globe if the medium allows for it.

### ***Disadvantages***

- Questionnaires without human intervention (as we have taken them here) can be quite passive and can miss out on some of the

finer nuances, leaving the responses open to interpretation. Interviews and Focus Group Sessions, as we shall see later, are instrumental in overcoming this shortfall of questionnaires.

- Response rates can be quite low. Choosing the right question types can help to optimize response rates, but very little can be done to encourage the respondents without directly conversing with them.

### ***Use Case***

A survey can be carried out through directly-administered questionnaires when the sample subjects are relatively well-versed with the ideas being discussed and comfortable at making the right responses without assistance. A survey about newspaper reading habits, for example, would be perfect for this mode.

### ***Interviews***

Conducting interviews can help you overcome most of the shortfalls of the previous two data collection methods that we have discussed here by allowing you to build a deeper understanding of the thinking behind the respondents' answers.

### ***Advantages***

- Interviews help the researchers uncover rich, deep insights and learn information that they may have missed otherwise.
- The presence of an interviewer can give the respondents additional comfort while answering the questionnaire and ensure correct interpretation of the questions.
- The physical presence of a persistent, well-trained interviewer can significantly improve the response rate.

### ***Disadvantages***

- Reaching out to all respondents to conduct interviews is a massive, time-consuming



exercise that leads to a major increase in the cost of conducting a survey.

- To ensure the effectiveness of the whole exercise, the interviewers must be well-trained in the necessary soft skills and the relevant subject matter.

### *Use Case*

Interviews are the most suitable method for surveys that touch upon complex issues like healthcare and family welfare. The presence of an interviewer to help respondents interpret and understand the questions can be critical to the success of the survey.

## Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions take the interactive benefits of an interview to the next level by bringing a carefully chosen group together for a moderated discussion on the subject of the survey.

### *Advantages*

- The presence of several relevant people together at the same time can encourage them to engage in a healthy discussion and may help researchers uncover information that they may not have envisaged.
- It helps the researchers corroborate the facts instantly; any inaccurate response will most likely be countered by other members of the focus group.
- It gives the researchers a chance to view both sides of the coin and build a balanced perspective on the matter.

### *Disadvantages*

- Finding groups of people who are relevant to the survey and persuading them to come together for the session at the same time can be a difficult task.
- The presence of excessively loud members in the focus group can subdue the opinions of those who are less vocal.

- The members of a focus group can often fall prey to group-think if one of them turns out to be remarkably persuasive and influential. This will bury the diversity of opinion that may have otherwise emerged. The moderator of a Focus Group Discussion must be on guard to prevent this from happening.

### *Use Case*

Focus Group Discussions with the lecturers of a university can be a good way of collecting information on ways in which our education system can be made more research-driven.

### **Tool Tip**

Keeping these factors in mind will go a long way toward helping you choose between the four data collection methods. The recent evolution of technology has given researchers powerful tools and dramatically transformed the ways that surveyors interface with survey respondents.

# Chapter 3:

## Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research

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Before you formulate your questionnaire, it is important to consider what type of information you'd like to collect — qualitative or quantitative. Both qualitative and quantitative research have their places in data collection.

## Quantitative Research

Quantitative research (derived from the word “quantity”) describes research that produces countable or numerical results.

### *Examples of Quantitative Questions*

How long does it take you to travel to work?

- ☐ 0-20 minutes
- ☐ 21-40 minutes
- ☐ 41-60 minutes
- ☐ Over 1 hour

What forms of transportation do you use while traveling to and from work? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Personal car or taxi
- ☐ Auto
- ☐ Rickshaw
- ☐ Bicycle
- ☐ Metro
- ☐ Other

Would you move to a new location just to decrease your commute time?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not applicable

Rate each form of transportation on a scale of 1-5.

(1 is strongly dislike, 2 is dislike, 3 is neutral, 4 is like, 5 is strongly like)

- ☐ Personal car or taxi
- ☐ Auto
- ☐ Rickshaw
- ☐ Bicycle
- ☐ Metro

## Qualitative Research

Qualitative research describes research that produces non-numerical results. It generally

investigates the “why” and “how” of your research question.

### *Examples of Qualitative Questions*

Do you like your commute to and from work? Why?

How do you generally get to and from work? Why is the metro your favorite form of transportation?

Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about your commute?

## When to Use Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Qualitative research is often used as exploratory research. It is helpful to provide insights into the problem you want to research more, or it helps to identify ideas and hypothesis for future quantitative research. Qualitative research also is useful in learning more about the “why” and “how” behind your question.

Quantitative research is a great way to generate numerical data, create usable statistics, and generalize results or uncover patterns from a larger population.

To figure out whether you should use qualitative research, quantitative research, or a mix of the two, look at your research question, outcomes and indicators. (If you don’t have these, go back to Chapter 1!)

### *Examples*

Research question: Are the children in my classrooms improving?

#### **Quantitative data:**

- Children’s test scores over time
- Children’s grades over time
- Children’s scores on an evaluation created for this research

### Qualitative data:

- Ask parents about whether they think their children are improving (and why)
- Ask teachers about whether they think their students are improving (and why)
- Ask students about whether they think they are learning more (and why)

Research question: Is my women's empowerment program making participants feel more independent?

### Quantitative data:

- Ask participants to rank their independence on a quantitative scale before and after the program
- Ask participants if they feel more independent (Yes or No question)
- Ask participants how likely they are to engage in measures of independence (i.e. standing up to their husband, taking more control over household finances) on a quantitative scale before and after the program

### Qualitative data:

- Ask participants how they feel after completing the program
- Ask participants about whether they think they are likely to engage in measures of independence (i.e. standing up to their husband, taking more control over household finances) before and after the program
- Ask participants' friends, husbands and/or children about the participants' behavior before and after the program

As the previous examples show, many research questions can be answered using both quantitative and qualitative research. To decide which is right for you, think about your research question, what questions you need to answer, and the type of data that you are hoping to collect.

# Chapter 4:

## Choosing Your Survey Questions

Now that you are aware of the different elements of a questionnaire, the next step is to think about the various types of questions that you would want to ask in a given questionnaire. The below questions can help you decide which questions you should ask.

### 1. What Kind of Information Do You Need?

Different categories of information include: personal background (name, religion, age, caste, gender, etc.), education information, health information, government schemes subscription, etc.

For example, say that we are looking to measure the change in students' learning outcomes. We could decide that we need some personal details of the students (age and gender) as well as learning levels of the students, classroom activities of the teachers, and some school-level information. We would not need details on the religion or caste of the students, personal details on the teachers, or information about the students' families.

#### Tool Tip

To arrive at the different sets of information, put the outcome in the centre of a paper and write all the things that can possibly impact that outcome. Talk to your program officers and field staff about it.

## 2. What Information Can Be Easily Collected?

Personal information can be easily collected but BMI, height, weight, etc. might be difficult to collect. It is easy to ask someone their weight, but the accuracy of this data is often low. Measuring people's weight with a scale is far more accurate, but it is also more difficult.

Choose parameters that are useful and can be collected effortlessly.

For example, say that you want to judge a teacher's classroom skills. You might be tempted to capture a lot of information about the classroom — you can probably sit in the classroom and capture classroom activities for an hour. Or you could simply do a 5-minute observation to learn about what happens on a typical day. You need to balance the effort in collecting additional information and the value of that information.

### Tool Tip

To arrive at the final data points, think of the following things: how difficult will it be to collect that information, how would respondents react to a particular question, and how quickly can you collect a particular piece of information?

## 3. What Information is Actually Useful for the Organization?

It is tempting to collect all information that you can. But it is important to only collect information that is useful for the organization.

For example, say that you want to judge a teacher's classroom skills through a 5-minute observation. It would be easy to simultaneously collect other information on the school or students. However, don't collect information just because you can collect it! Only collect

information that will help you in analysis.

## 4. Did You Include the 5 Key Questions (Introduction, Identifiers, Consent, Open-Ended Fields and Validations)?

Always have the following questions in your questionnaire.

- Introduction: the right introduction to the survey can set the tone of the survey and is often helpful in making the respondent understand why the survey is crucial and how it will help her/him in return.
- Identifiers: name, age, father's name and location.
- Consent: most surveys in India require organizations to seek the beneficiary's consent. It's a good ethical practice.
- Open-ended fields: ask for any information that might not be captured by the specific question types.
- Validations: information like GPS and time taken to validate whether the questionnaire was filled correctly.

By leveraging smartphone-based tools for data collection, you will be able to automatically capture GPS location and the average time taken for surveys. This will be helpful in creating a check to ensure your field surveyors are collecting accurate data from the ground.

For instance, if you are collecting data from households in a village, then possibly the GPS coordinates of each survey response should be a minimum of 15 metres apart. Similarly, if the average time taken for a survey is 20 mins and one of your surveyors is submitting responses in under 5 mins, this could indicate issues with his data quality and validity.

### Example

Say that you want to measure the improvement in student learning outcomes at

a given school. Go through the four questions above to create the most important questions in your survey.

#### **Question 1: What kind of information do you need?**

- Reading level of the kids, to see improvement in learning levels
- Teacher effort aimed at reading, to see improvement in teaching skills
- Background information on teachers and students, to track improvement and changes
- School information, to explain differences in student learning outcomes in different types of schools

#### **Questions 2-3: What information can be easily collected and is relevant to the organization?**

- Reading level of the kids: use the [ASER](#) battery and sample a few kids from a classroom. Information on all the kids is not necessary.
- Teacher effort aimed at reading: observe a classroom of a few teachers for 5-10 minutes while they are teaching reading skills to the students.
- Background information: for students, only collect age, gender, class, and name; for teachers, collect only age, experience, classes and subjects taught.
- School information: collect information on number of students, teachers, teacher-pupil ratio, as well as average fees. Any other information that is irrelevant to the analysis should not be collected.

#### **Question 4: Did you include the 5 key questions?**

- Add introduction
- Add relevant identifiers for students (if not already covered in background information)
- Add consent

- Add an open-ended field for surveyor comments
- Add GPS and time stamp to validate the information from the field

## Chapter 5:

# Choosing the Right Survey Question Types

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Choosing a question for your survey is not enough. It is essential to choose the correct question type. A good question asked in the wrong way will not give you good data.

There are 8 main question types that you can use for surveys. Below are descriptions of each question type and when to use each.

### Text

This is the most open-ended type of question. One can type in anything. It is ideal to use this type of question to collect a person's name or to collect qualitative information such as "Any other feedback".

Example: What is your name?

### Dichotomous (Yes/No, True/False)

Dichotomous questions seek a binary response to a question.

Example: Do you love to read?

A. Yes

B. No

## Numerical

This is used to capture numbers. Numerical questions should only be used to collect specific numbers that cannot be confined into certain ranges.

Example: How many times do you jog in a month? (numbers only)

## Multiple Choice Questions

This is the most frequently-used question type. This can be single-select or multiple-select based on the need of the question. Multiple choice questions (or MCQs) are highly recommended, since they reduce the chances of capturing the wrong information.

Example (single-select multiple choice): What is your current education status?

- Uneducated
- Primary
- Secondary
- Senior Secondary
- Graduate
- Post-graduate
- Doctorate

Example (multi-select multiple choice): Which of the following subjects do you study?

- Maths
- Hindi
- English
- Science
- Social Science
- Environmental Studies
- Other

When creating options in an MCQ, it is very important that all options are mutually

exclusive but collectively exhaustive. (See Chapter 7 for more information.)

## Tabular/Roster

These are used to capture the same sets of information about multiple entities. For example, personal background about a household can be captured using a table.

	A	B	C	D
1	Name	Relationship with head	Age	Education
2				
3				
4				
5				

## Scale

This question type is generally used to record preferences, opinions and ratings.

For example, you can use scale for capturing information on how good a particular class was. This question could use a 5-point scale question: Bad, Fair, Good, Very Good, Excellent.

Example: How was the food?  
Poor, Average, Good, Excellent

## Media Questions

Sometimes you want to capture information like pictures, audio, or drawings. If you are using mobile-based technology, you can use media questions to verify captured information.

Example: Take a photo of the anganwadi you visited.



## Maps and Timestamps

If you are using mobile-based technology, it is also possible to capture geo-coordinates and time-stamps to enrich your data and make it more verifiable.

Example: Take the geo-location of the [anganwadi](#) you visited.

# Chapter 6:

## Best Practices Around Writing Survey Questions

Chapters 4 and 5 talked about choosing the correct questions and question types for your survey. Here are a few additional tips to help you frame questions correctly.

### 1. One Question at a Time

Keep the questions simple, crisp, and to the point. Make sure that you are not asking multiple questions in one question – it might make the answer complex and confuse the respondent.

For example, see what is better:

**Q1: Do you love to study? Why?**

OR

**Q1: Do you love to study?**

A. Yes

B. No

**Q2: If yes, why do you love to study?**

A. To maximize knowledge

B. To learn new things

C. To score good grades

D. Other

Remember, the “length” of your questionnaire is not determined by the number of questions, but by the time taken to answer them.

The second format of asking the same question breaks down the questions while simultaneously reducing the time taken to answer them. People who answer “No” in Q1 will not be asked the next question – reducing the time taken by the surveyor in explaining Q2. Breaking down the two questions also allowed us to turn Q2 into a closed-ended question, which reduced the time taken in answering Q2.

### 2. Beware of Subjective Questions

Use text/subjective questions only when there is no other suitable type of question you can use. Most subjective questions can easily be written as MCQs. The problem with subjective questions is that, if you let people input answers, the same thing can be said in many different ways.

Take the case of a village name: Gandipet. People can have many different ways of writing the same thing: Gandipetta, Gandipetu, Gandipettu, etc. Hence, it is always better to list out all possible options.

For questions like state/district/block/village name, list all possible options in the form of a list. For questions related to age, give a list of suitable ranges.

### 3. Ask Objective Questions

Do not include the answer in your question, as it will introduce surveying bias.

For example, rather than asking “Do you think India is on a downward trajectory?”, you should ask “What trajectory is India on? A. Downward B. Upward C. Other”.

## 4. Avoid Negative Questions

One of the best ways to be objective is by avoiding negative questions. Most positive questions are more direct than negative questions.

For example, rather than asking “What are the reasons India is not growing?”, ask “What are the factors affecting India’s growth?” This reduces bias and makes your question more objective.

## 5. Be Careful while Asking Sensitive Questions

Don’t ask any critical or sensitive information directly. People are often unwilling to share sensitive information with a third party.

For example, asking a question like “What is your income?” as a numerical question might result in dishonest answers by survey respondents. Asking this question as a multiple choice question by bucketing responses into different income brackets might result in more accurate responses.

For any sensitive questions, keep it under cover. For example, if you were to ask students whether they have cheated in an exam, it might be better to ask the question in a multiple-choice question that does not focus on cheating:

I have done the following with my school friends:

- A. Played cricket/soccer after school
- B. Got punishment for coming late to the class because I was playing

- C. Shared answers in a test
- D. Had lunch from each others’ tiffin box

While asking sensitive questions, it also helps to use the right words. In the previous example, “copying” and “cheating” were not used because they will make the question negative. Using more neutral words like “sharing” makes people more likely to answer honestly.

## 6. Don’t Ask for Too Much Detail

It is important to have the right amount of detail. Don’t dig deeper than needed, and do take only superficial information.

For example, if you want to know about the sources of energy at home, don’t ask about all the appliances used. Only ask whether specific energy sources (electricity, cowdung, gas, etc.) are being used or not. Make sure to cover all the major sources of energy.

# Chapter 7:

# The MECE Framework: Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive Questions



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Once you are clear about your research question and the type of data you will collect, the next step is to put together a questionnaire that can help you collect that data. Before putting together the questionnaire, it is important to understand the MECE framework.

## MECE Framework

“MECE” stands for “Mutually Exclusive and Collectively Exhaustive”.

When designing your questionnaire, it is important to ensure that all the different questions and sections are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. “Mutually exclusive” means that no two questions should be repeated. “Collectively exhaustive” means that questions should be chosen in a way that captures all the required information.

It is important to note that the MECE framework applies to both questions and answer choices.

## Examples

Consider the following two questions, and figure out whether they are MECE.

**Q1: What is the educational status of all the members of the household?**

**Q2: Name the highest educated member here.**

Answer: This is not MECE because we can capture the information needed in Q2 in Q1 itself. We don’t need another question. Thus it is not mutually exclusive.

Consider the following answer choice, and figure out whether it is MECE.

**Question: How many children do you have?**

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4 or more

Answer: This is not MECE. This answer choice covers all the positive values, but it doesn’t give an option for 0. Thus it isn’t collectively exhaustive.

## Exercise

See whether the answer choices in the following questions are MECE or not:

**Q1: What is your religion?**

- A. Hindu
- B. Muslim
- C. Christian
- D. Sikh

Answer: No, these answers are not MECE. We haven’t included Jainism, Buddhism, and several other religions. The choices are mutually exclusive but not collectively exhaustive. (See the Tool Tip below.)

**Q2: Which bracket does your age lie?**

- A. 0-10
- B. 11-20
- C. 21-43
- D. 44-80

Answer: No, these choices are mutually exclusive, but they are not collectively exhaustive. They don’t cover the option for ages greater than 80

**Q3. Which category do you fall in?**

- A. General
- B. OBC
- C. SC
- D. ST

Answer: Yes, these answers are MECE. The answer choices are mutually exclusive (no overlap) as well as collectively exhaustive (covers all possible options).

#### Tool Tip

An easy way to ensure that a multiple choice question is collectively exhaustive is to add the option “Other”. If the enumerator chooses “Other”, you can ask the question “If other, please specify”.

# Chapter 8:

## Closed vs. Open-Ended Questions

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Every question on a survey will be either an closed or open-ended question. This means that closed and open-ended questions are at the core of your survey design. It is crucial to know the difference between closed and open-ended questions and when to use each.

### The Difference Between Closed and Open-Ended Questions

Closed-ended questions have a defined, closed set of responses. This means that respondents only have a limited number of options for their answer to the question. Closed-ended questions come in a multitude of forms, but they are often in the form of multiple choice (single or multi-select), scale or dichotomous questions.

Here are a few examples of closed-ended questions:

#### How old are you?

- 0-10 years old
- 11-20 years old
- 21-30 years old
- 31-40 years old
- 41-50 years old
- Over 50 years old

#### Do you feel better today than yesterday?

- Yes
- No
- I feel the same

#### Are you pregnant?

- Yes
- No

#### How do you feel about this health program?

- strongly dislike
- dislike
- neutral
- like
- strongly like

In contrast, open-ended questions do not have a defined set of responses. This means that the set of possible responses is infinite, so respondents can provide any answer they like. Open-ended questions are generally in the form of narrative or text questions.

Here are the previous examples, reworded as open-ended questions:

#### How old are you?

#### How do you feel today compared to yesterday?

**Is it possible that you might be pregnant?**

**What do you think about this health program?**

These are open-ended questions because the answers to these questions are not pre-determined, like they were previously. For example, in the first question, the respondent is not limited to 6 age brackets; they can answer with any number, or even ages like “8 years and 3 months”.

## When to Use Open-Ended Questions

In general, open-ended questions are useful for qualitative research, learning more information about a topic, and surveys with small sample sizes. There are four main cases when open-ended questions should be used.

### 1. Preliminary Research

It is often helpful to conduct preliminary research to learn more about your problem before conducting your final survey. Open-ended questions are a key component of preliminary research, since you generally won't know the answers that you'll receive. Instead, you are looking to gain information that you likely don't know.

For example, imagine that you want to improve your website. Before you can write an effective survey, it would be useful to get people's general thoughts on your website. This will help you write a more targeted final survey.

Your preliminary research could use open-ended questions like:

- What do you think about this website?
- What are your favorite parts of the website?
- What are your least favorite parts of the website?

- What could be improved on the website?

Using the answers to these questions would help to write the final survey. For example, if many people said during preliminary research that they don't like the colors on the website, you could include a section on your final survey where respondents rank different color palettes.

In addition, you can use preliminary research to improve the closed-ended questions in your final survey. Most surveys use closed-ended questions, but writing closed-ended questions requires knowing the possible set of answers to your questions. Often, you don't know this before you start your survey. Preliminary research with open-ended questions is helpful to learning the set of answers for future closed-ended questions.

For example, imagine that you want to learn more about why people are not attending your meetings. It would be easy to analyse the results of a closed-ended question like:

Why did you miss the last meeting?

- It was too early for me to attend
- It was too late for me to attend
- It was too far from my house
- Other

However, preliminary research would be a great way to learn the full set of possible answers. For example, you could use an open-ended question (e.g. “Why did you miss the last meeting?”) to get more information on why people miss meetings. Then, once you understand the most common reasons, you can write a much better closed-ended question in your final survey.

### 2. Expert Interviews

Experts usually know more about a subject than you will, so it is useful to use open-ended questions to get as much information as

possible. Limiting experts to a pre-determined set of responses with closed-ended questions will be less productive than giving them the freedom to demonstrate their knowledge and talk at length.

### 3. Surveys with a Small Sample Size

For a large number of respondents, it can be difficult to read and analyse the answers to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions can often lead to responses of several sentences or paragraphs. Comparing these answers across dozens or hundreds of respondents is extremely difficult and time-consuming.

However, this becomes much easier if you're conducting a survey with a small sample size (e.g. under 20 respondents). For small sample sizes, open-ended questions are a great way to solicit more detailed information in a way that is still analyzable.

### 4. The End of Any Survey

The end of a survey is the perfect place to include an open-ended question. No matter how well designed a survey is, it can never account for all possible opinions and data. Including an open-ended question at the end of a survey — such as “Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?” or “Is there anything that I've missed?” — will allow respondents to share extra information, opinions, or concerns. Giving respondents the freedom to include additional information or comments is also a good way to show respect for the time and effort they took in completing your survey.

### When to use Closed-Ended Questions

Closed-ended questions should be used for easier analysis and reporting of the data you are collecting.

For example, imagine that you are polling

1,000 people about their internet usage. If you ask the open-ended question “Tell me about your internet usage?”, you will end up with 1000 unique responses that cannot easily be analysed or reported. Instead, if you use a closed-ended questions like the one below, you will be able to better understand and report the results.

On average, how many hours do you use the internet per week?

- 0-5 hours
- 6-10 hours
- 11-15 hours
- 16-20 hours
- Greater than 20 hours

With a closed-ended question, you can easily analyse the data and report a clear result like “63% of respondents use the internet less than 5 hours per week”.

#### Tool Tip

In general, qualitative research will use open-ended questions and quantitative research will use closed-ended questions. See Chapter 4 for more details on qualitative and quantitative research.

## Chapter 9: Sampling Your Population

Ideally, a survey should gather data on every single person in the target population. For example, a survey about learning outcomes

at a small school could track the test scores of every student. Collecting data on everyone in the target population is the best case scenario, since it ensures that everybody who matters to the survey is represented accurately.

However, this is only possible if the population is small enough and the researchers have sufficient resources to reach out to everyone. This often is not the case, so researchers have to identify a subset of the population to survey.

How you choose this subset of the target population is crucial to the quality of your data. The group must be carefully identified and representative of the larger population, else your data will not be useful for drawing inferences.

If done right, survey sampling can save time and money while allowing you to draw inferences about a large group of people.

## 3 Things to Keep in Mind While Choosing a Sample Population

### 1. Consistency

It is important that researchers understand the population on a case-by-case basis and test the sample for consistency before going ahead with the survey. This is especially critical for surveys that track changes across time and space. If your sample is consistent, you can be confident that any change in the data reflects real change across the population, rather than change across atypical individuals in the population.

### 2. Diversity

Ensuring diversity of the sample is a tall order, as reaching some portions of the population and convincing them to participate in the survey can be difficult. However, for a sample to truly represent the population, the sample

must be as diverse as the population itself and sensitive to local differences.

### 3. Transparency

There are several constraints that dictate the size and structure of the population. It is imperative that researchers discuss these limitations and maintain transparency about the procedures followed while selecting the sample, so that the results of the survey are seen with the right perspective.

## Choosing Your Sampling Technique

### Probability Sampling

For probability sampling techniques, each person in the population has a defined, non-zero probability of being included in the sample. Probability sampling provides the most valid or credible results because it reflects the characteristics of the population from which they are selected. There are three probability sampling methods: random sampling, systematic sampling and stratified sampling.

#### Random Sampling

**When:** There is a very large population and it is difficult to identify every member of the population.

**How:** The entire process of sampling is done in a single step, where each subject is selected independently of the other people in the sample.

**Pros:** In this technique, each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample.

**Cons:** When there is a very large population, it is often difficult to identify every member of the population so the pool of subjects can become biased. For example, dialing numbers

from a phone book may not be entirely random since the numbers would correspond to a localized region.

**Use case:** Want to study and understand the rice consumption pattern across rural India? While it might not be possible to cover every household, you could draw meaningful insights by building your sample from randomly-selected districts or villages.

### ***Systematic Sampling***

**When:** Your given population is logically homogenous. This means that they all share a characteristic that is important to the survey. For example, suppose a supermarket wants to study the buying habits of their Sunday customers. The customers who enter the supermarket on Sunday are a logically homogeneous population since they share 2 key qualities: “customers of the supermarket”, and “visited the supermarket on Sunday”.

**How:** Arrange the elements of the population in some order and select terms at regular intervals from the list.

**Pros:** Systematic sampling is far simpler than random sampling, and it ensures that the population will be evenly sampled. In random sampling, there is a chance that the sample might include a clustered selection of subjects. This can be avoided through systematic sampling.

**Cons:** The possible weakness is an inherent periodicity of the list (i.e. if the people you are surveying are already ordered in a certain non-random way). This can be avoided by randomizing the list of your population entities, as you would randomize a deck of cards for instance, before you proceed with systematic sampling.

**Use Case:** Continuing with the earlier example, the supermarket can use systematic sampling to study the buying habits of their

Sunday customers. They can choose every 10th customer entering the supermarket and conduct the study on this sample.

### ***Stratified Sampling***

**When:** You can divide your population into characteristics of importance for the research.

**How:** A stratified sample, in essence, tries to recreate the statistical features of the population on a smaller scale. Before sampling, the population is divided into characteristics of importance for the research. For example, by gender, social class, education level, religion, etc. Then the population is randomly sampled within each category or stratum. If 38% of the population is college-educated, then 38% of the sample is randomly selected from the college-educated subset of the population.

**Pros:** This method attempts to overcome the shortcomings of random sampling by splitting the population into various distinct segments and selecting entities from each of them. This ensures that every category of the population is represented in the sample. Stratified sampling is often used when one or more of the sections in the population have a low incidence relative to the other sections.

**Cons:** Stratified sampling is the most complex method of sampling. It lays down criteria that may be difficult to fulfill. This can place a heavy strain on available resources.

**Use Case:** If 38% of the population is college-educated and 72% of the population have not been to college, then 38% of the sample is randomly selected from the college-educated subset of the population and 72% of the sample is randomly selected from the rest of the population. Maintaining the ratios while selecting a randomized sample is key to stratified sampling.

## ***Non-Probability Sampling***

For non-probability sampling, the sample is constructed with no probability structure. The selection is not randomized, so the resulting sample is not fully representative of the target population. There are three non-probability sampling methods: convenience sampling, snowball sampling and quota sampling.

### ***Convenience Sampling***

**When:** During preliminary research efforts.

**How:** As the name suggests, the elements of such a sample are picked only on the basis of convenience in terms of availability, reach and accessibility.

**Pros:** The sample is created quickly without adding any additional burden on the available resources.

**Cons:** The likelihood of this approach leading to a sample that is truly representative of the population is very poor.

**Use Case:** This method is often used during preliminary research efforts to get a gross estimate of the results, without incurring the cost or time required to select a random sample. For example, interviewing 10 of your friends over the phone would count as convenience sampling.

### ***Snowball Sampling***

**When:** When you can rely on your initial respondents to refer you to the next respondents.

**How:** Just as the snowball rolls and gathers mass, the sample constructed in this way will grow in size as you conduct the survey. At the end of the survey, you ask your initial respondents to refer you to other people to survey.

**Pros:** Though the costs associated with this method are significantly lower, you will still end up with a sample that is very relevant to your study.

**Cons:** You restrict yourself to only a small, homogenous section of the population.

**Use Case:** Snowball sampling can be useful when you need the sample to reflect certain features that are difficult to find. For example, to conduct a survey of people who go jogging in a certain park in the mornings, snowball sampling would be a quick, accurate way to create the sample. You can find someone who jogs in the park in the morning, then ask them to refer you to their friends who also jog in that park in the morning.

### ***Quota Sampling***

**When:** When you can characterize the population based on certain desired features.

**How:** Quota sampling is the non-probability equivalent of stratified sampling. It starts with characterizing the population based on certain desired features and assigns a quota to each subset of the population.

**Pros:** This process can be extended to cover several characteristics and varying degrees of complexity.

**Cons:** Though the method is superior to convenience and snowball sampling, it does not offer the statistical insights of any of the probability methods.

**Use Case:** If a survey requires a sample of fifty men and fifty women, a quota sample will survey respondents until the right number of each type has been surveyed. Unlike stratified sampling, the sample isn't necessarily randomized.



### **Tool Tip**

Probability methods are clearly more accurate but the costs can be prohibitive. For the initial stages of a study, non-probability methods might be sufficient to give you a sense of what you're dealing with. For detailed insights and results that you can rely on, move on to the more sophisticated probabilistic methods as the study gathers pace and takes a more concrete structure.

## **Minimizing Sampling Error**

There is one easy way to minimize sampling error – increase the sample population size. The more respondents you have, the more accurate your survey will be. However, it isn't always possible to increase the sample population because of financial restrictions.

Avoiding three common errors will help to minimize sampling error without increasing your sample size.

### **1. Avoid Population Specification Errors**

A population specification error occurs when a critical segment of the population is not included in the sample. This is the result of a knowledge problem or gap. The results of a survey with a population specification error will shed some light into your issue, but they cannot provide the full picture.

For example, imagine that you want to learn more about household decision making, so you survey men about the decisions in their household. This would be correct if only men make household decisions, but often women and children also have influence over decisions. By only surveying men, you will miss out on part of the picture.

An easy way to avoid population specification errors is to learn how similar surveys sampled

their target population. By checking on other surveys, you can be sure that you are not forgetting a critical segment of your sample population.

### **2. Avoid Sample Frame Error**

Sample frame error occurs when a survey samples the wrong segment of the total population, usually because the surveyor has missed a new trend or change in their target population.

For example, imagine that you want to learn how attendees feel about your program, and you use the attendance sheets from two weeks ago to create a target population. However, unknown to you, a new group of people started attending your program one week ago. The results of your survey will be misleading, since they do not include one of the key segments of your target population.

An easy way to avoid sample frame error is to take plenty of time to study your target population. Be sure that nothing has changed about it recently, and be sure that you have accounted for all types of people in your sample.

### **3. Avoid Non-Response Error**

It is normal for some targeted respondents to not respond to a survey. However, this can become a problem if the non-respondents generally hold a view that is different from the respondents. As a result, the final data will be skewed toward the opinions of those who responded.

For example, imagine that you want to survey housewives about their free time, and you do this by calling them on the phone during the day. The women who do not respond are the ones who have less free time (since they don't have enough time to pick up the phone). Meanwhile, the women who respond are the ones who have more free time. The results



of the data will report higher free time among housewives than is actually true.

An easy way to avoid non-response error is to conduct follow-up surveys or contact those who did respond through alternative means. In addition, keeping the questionnaire short will help encourage people to respond the first time.

## Calculating Sample Size

Determining the size of your sample population is one of the most difficult decisions to make in your survey. A larger sample can yield more accurate results — but the more responses you collect, the more expensive it gets.

### *Statistical Variables*

To calculate the best sample size for your needs, you need to make 2 decisions about how accurate you want your data to be.

#### **1. Margin of error (also known as confidence interval):**

No sample will be perfect, so you need to decide how much error you are willing to allow. The margin of error determines how much variance you want to allow in your data.

For example, if you set a margin of error of 5% and find that 68% of women take iron pills, then that means that the real percentage of women who take iron pills is between 63% (68-5=63) and 73% (68+5=73).

#### **2. Confidence level:**

How confident do you want to be that the actual number falls within your margin of error? The most common confidence intervals are 90%, 95%, and 99% confident.

For example, imagine that you set a margin of error of 2% and a confidence level of

95%, then you find that 68% of women take iron pills. You can be 95% confident that the true number of women who take iron pills is between 66% and 70%.

The confidence level corresponds to a given z-score:

	Confidence level	Z-score
1	90%	1.645
2	95%	1.96
3	99%	2.576

### *Sample Size Formula for a Population of Unknown Size*

Often, a population is too large to easily measure. When this is the case, you can use a sample size formula that does not account for the size of the large population that you are surveying.

The sample size formula when you don't know the size of your large population is

$$n = \frac{z^2}{4m^2}$$

where  $n$  is the sample size you should use,  $m$  is the margin of error, and  $z$  is the z-score. (Note that if you have a margin of error of 5%,  $m = 0.05$ )

It is usually safe to use a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. If you plug these numbers into the formula, you get a sample size of 384. This means that 384 is a safe sample size for a large population of unknown size.

### *Sample Size Formula for a Population of Known Size*

You can calculate a more accurate sample

size if you know the size of the population that you are surveying.

For example, if you are studying the learning outcomes for a school with 200 students, your population size is 200. If you are studying women in Gujarat, the population size is the total number of women in Gujarat.

This does not have to be exact. Even an estimate of the population size will result in a better sample size than using the formula above.

The sample size formula when you know the size of your population is

$$n = \frac{pz^2}{z^2 - 4m^2(1 - p)}$$

where  $n$  is the sample size you should use,  $p$  is the size of the population being surveyed,

$m$  is the margin of error, and  $z$  is the z-score. (Note that if you have a margin of error of 5%,  $m = 0.05$ )

It is usually safe to use a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. The sample size formula with those figures (margin of error of 5% and confidence level of 95%) is

$$n = \frac{384.16p}{383.16 - p}$$

where  $n$  is the sample size you should use, and  $p$  is the size of the population being surveyed.

#### Tool Tip

Don't know which sample size formula to use? The last formula (for a sample size of known size with margin of error of 5% and confidence interval of 95%) is your safest bet.

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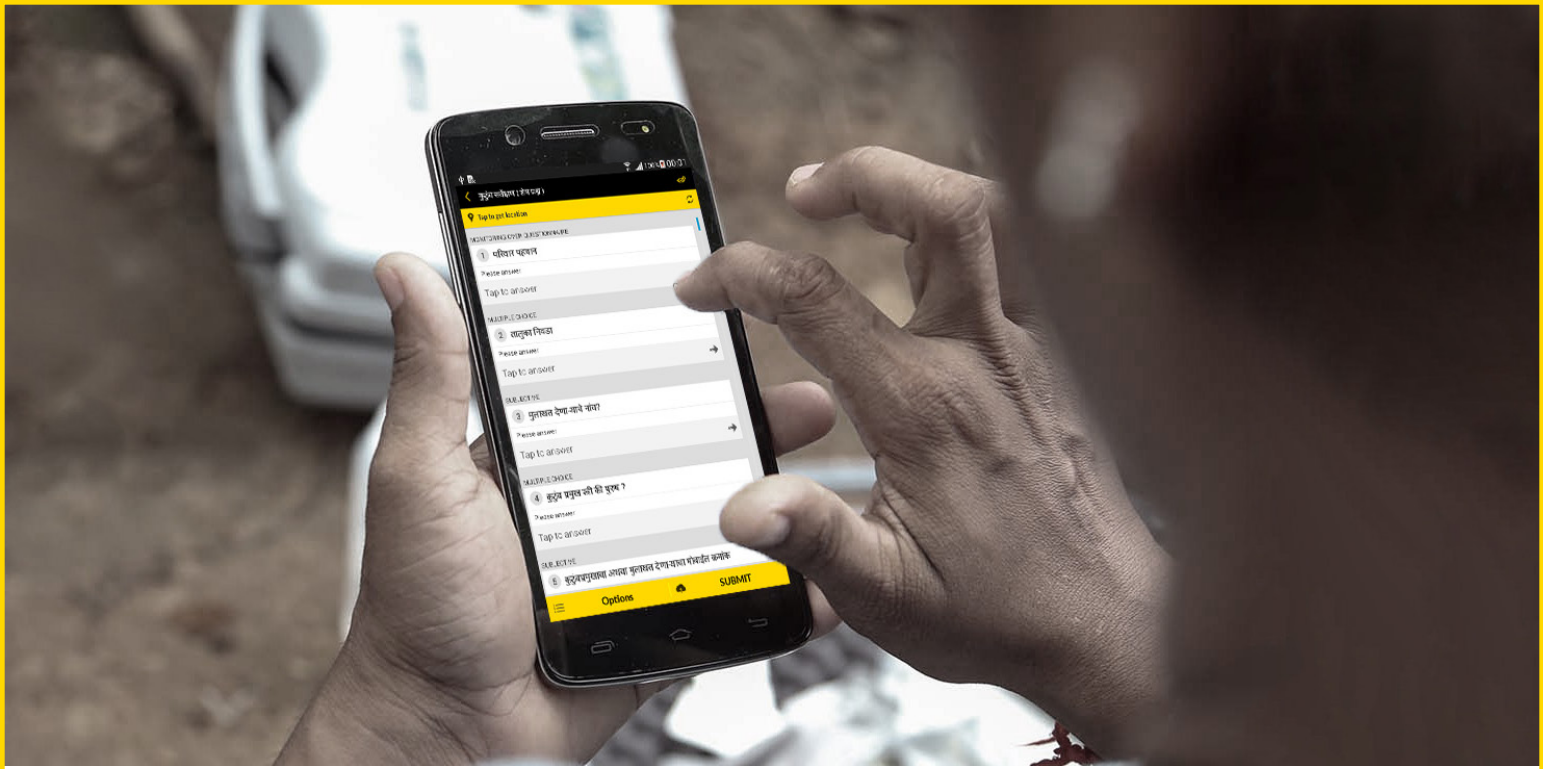
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SocialCops is a data technology company focused on powering the world's most important decisions through data from the

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We hope to take the big data revolution to where it matters the most – to use in decisions that affect human health, well being, safety and livelihoods.

## Partners

We are currently working with global organizations and ministries including [Hindustan Unilever](#), [UNICEF](#), [Govt. of Karnataka](#) and [Michelin](#) to drive large scale decision making and impact at the grassroots. We have currently onboarded some of the largest NGOs in India, such as [Magic Bus](#) and [Swades Foundation](#), onto the product platform offered by our Census tool. In total, we are working with over [140](#) partner organizations.

## Recognition

The work we have done at the intersection of data, technology and people has won us accolades globally – including the [United Nations World Youth Summit Award](#), [Global Social Entrepreneurship Competition](#), [IBM/IEEE Smart Planet Challenge](#) and [grants from Microsoft, IBM and Salesforce](#). We have also won various awards at the IITs and IIMs.

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