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Quick Tips

10 Steps to Make Sense of Answers to Open-Ended Questions

When you use open-ended questions, you rely on your respondents to produce their own answers and you do not provide them with responses to choose from. Examples of open-ended questions are: “Please describe one idea you will take home with you from today’s workshop” or “How can we improve this workshop for next time?”

Keep in mind that your goal with this technique is to simplify the information you have so you can use it for outcome reporting and program improvement. This is an example of applying the technique to a dairy parlor modernization workshop. In this example, 20 dairy producers attended the workshop. Eighteen completed the end-of-session form.

1. **Review your learning objectives for the workshop or program.** Look at your curriculum materials and review other information that reminds you of why you presented this workshop. Think about the overall goals for your program and how it fits into your plan of work. If you haven’t already recorded your learning objectives, outcomes or goals, write them down now. Your main goal is for your participants to learn how modernization might improve their quality of life both physically and financially.

   EXAMPLE

   Goal #1:

   Participants learn how modernizing their milking parlor might improve their quality of life physically and financially.

2. **Now, think of the written words, phrases and ideas that your participants might write in their answers that would demonstrate what they learned.** ` Make a list of them for each of the questions. This list becomes your “coding scheme” that you use to organize your participant’s answers into categories. Make certain you group words and phrases that belong together conceptually. Try to make categories that are “mutually exclusive” – in other words, they do not overlap.

   EXAMPLE

   My categories are:

   - Increased cost savings
   - Improvement in health – for dairy producers, farm families and workers

3. **Collect the completed forms and assign each form a unique identification number.**

4. **Use an electronic version of your form. Key or type each respondent’s ID next to his or her answer arranged under the relevant question.**

   EXAMPLE

   Question 1: Please describe one idea you will take home with you from today’s workshop.

   ID 1 – If I modernize my milking parlor, my body might not ache so much.
   ID 2 – No answer
   ID 3 – It would take me five years to recover costs for the change I had been planning. Seeing construction comparison costs really helped. I am making other plans now.

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5. **Save a copy of your electronic file and print a paper copy for yourself.**

6. **Choose one question and read respondents' answers that you have listed.** Circle, underline or highlight those answers that correspond to your coding scheme. Count how many respondents gave answers that fell within a category. Take the number of people who listed the word, phrase or idea and divide that by the number of people who responded to the question. Remember the number of people who responded to a question will generally be fewer that those who attended the workshop. Record the number and percentage of people who gave answers to each category. Repeat for each category in your coding scheme and for each question on the form.

EXAMPLE

Results for Question 1 (an idea respondents took home from the workshop):

Increased cost savings	8 of 18	44%
Improvement in health	4 of 18	22%
No answer	3 of 18	17%
Other	3 of 18	17%

7. **Keep a written record of the coding decisions that you make – and why you made them – so that you can defend them if someone asks.** If you are concerned that someone will accuse you of bias in your interpretation, have someone else look at your data and use your coding scheme. Ask your fellow reader to follow the procedure that you did. Then, compare your categorized responses to those of your fellow interpreter. What percentage of times do you agree? At its most basic, consider this percentage your "reliability score" or a measure of how consistently you and your reader classified responses the same way. Ideally, your reliability score is a minimum of 80 percent.

8. **Look at the words or phrases that did not fall into your original categories or ones marked "other."** You can organize them into "emergent" categories, if you choose. These are categories that you did not think of ahead of time, but are nonetheless present in the data.

9. **Think about the trends within the answers to each question.** Which are most important or useful to report for the audiences and stakeholders interested in the results of your programming? Which show ways to improve your programming?

10. **Write a few bullet points that describe some counts and percentages for the purpose of your central audience.** Supplement the bullet points with quotes from your participants in order to support your conclusions about the results of your programming.

EXAMPLE

Learning outcomes for dairy modernization workshop:

- Forty-four percent of respondents (8 of 18) learned that they could save money by using alternative parlor designs.
- Twenty-two percent (4 of 18) learned that they could improve their physical comfort and health by using a different parlor design.

Further reading:

Becker, H. (1998). *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while doing it.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kirk, J., & Miller, M. (1986). *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Wolcott, H. (1990*). Writing up qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA; Sage Publications.

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