Wording for rating scales

Close-ended questions using ordinal scales as the answer option are very popular because they measure gradations in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, you may want to know to what extent participants found the workshop useful and use a scale of "very useful", "somewhat useful", "not very useful" or "not at all useful".

When using a scale like this, think about what you want to know. Provide clear instructions and keep the order of choices (e.g., from low to high or negative to positive) the same throughout the questionnaire. Consider your respondents' age, literacy level, and cultural background to make the scale understandable and appropriate.

Length of the scale.   In general, limit the number of points along your scale. Common practice is five or fewer points for unipolar scales (scales that measure along one dimension such as from "poor" to "excellent") and seven or fewer points along a bipolar scale(scales that measure in two directions, for example from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied".   In all cases, think about the level of differentiation you need and what will be understood by the respondent.

Odd or even point scale. There is no preferred or better choice. An odd number of points allows people to select a middle option. An even number forces respondents to take sides. An even number is appropriate when you want to know what direction the people in the middle are leaning. However, forcing people to choose a side, without a middle point, may frustrate some respondents.

Label the points in the scale. Avoid using just numbers to indicate the points on the scale. Providing a word label over each point better ensures that everyone interprets the points similarly reducing measurement error. Also, few people express their opinions in numerical terms so numbers have less meaning to respondents. Numbers may confuse respondents or have unintended meaning so numbers can be removed from the scale.

POOR				BETTER			
Definitely won't			Definitely will	Definitely won't	Probably won't	Probably will	Definitely will
1	2	3	4				

Balanced scales. Make sure that the scale is balanced with an equal number of positive and negative categories. In the following example, only one point in the scale on the left is negative.

POOR	BETTER
☐ Poor	☐ Very poor
☐ Fair	☐ Poor
☐ Good	☐ Fair
☐ Very good	☐ Good
☐ Excellent	☐ Very good

Center point on bipolar scale: A common mistake when creating a rating scale is including "no opinion" or "uncertain" as a middle response on a bipolar scale. These options are not actually a part of the scale order. A middle category in a scale between "agree" and "disagree" would be "neither agree nor

disagree." Options such as: "no opinion," "not sure," "undecided", "don't know," or, "not applicable are placed off the scale, in a separate space.

POOR	BETTER
☐ Very satisfied ☐ Somewhat satisfied ☐ No opinion ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied ☐ Very dissatisfied	☐ Very satisfied ☐ Somewhat satisfied ☐ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied ☐ Very dissatisfied ☐ Don't know ☐ No opinion

Match response to question. Be as direct and specific as possible, focusing the response options on what you want to measure. In the following example, we want to measure usefulness of information provided at a workshop. Phrasing the response options on an 'agree-disagree' scale requires the respondent to first decide how useful the information was and then whether they agree or disagree that the workshop provided useful information. This is burdensome and confusing for respondents.

POOR	BETTER
To what extent do you agree or disagree that the workshop provided useful information? ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree	How useful do you think the information is that the workshop provided? ☐ Very useful ☐ Somewhat useful ☐ Not very useful ☐ Not at all useful

Keep labels consistent. Finally, the labels you use in the scale need to refer to the same thing.   In the example below, the scale in the left column includes various concepts- worthy of time, interest level, quality. The example in the right column includes only interest level, making a better response scale.

What was your reaction to the session? (Please check one response.)

POOR	BETTER
____ not worth my time ____ interesting ____ could have been better ____ excellent ____ terrific	____ not at all interesting ____slightly interesting ____moderately interesting ____ very interesting ____extremely interesting

Key resource: Dillman, D., Smyth, J., Christian, L. 2009. Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method. 3rd Edition. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.