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# Research Tips

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## Survey research When to give a neutral choice

When making a survey scale, how many choices should you give?

The answer is...it depends? In general, Norman and Steiner (1996) advise either a five-point, six-point or seven-point scale. Anything less than five points does not give respondents enough choice. You can also construct eight-point and nine-point scales, but I think these scale lengths might be harder for people to make gradient choices. The experts say that a scale with more than nine points is definitely considered too hard for people to make discernible choices.

A five-point or seven-point scale gives respondents a midpoint or neutral choices. How do you choose whether to give them a midpoint or not? If you feel the group's opinion has a moderate level of conviction, then a middle option should be included because some people will be more likely to choose the midpoint as their opinions are not yet polarized (i.e., the group has not yet formed opposing opinions).

If, however, the group's convictions are high, then the middle option is unnecessary as they will be less likely to choose it because they have more polarized views on the subject matter; that is, group members are clearly leaning toward one opinion or the other (Lambert, Blais, Potvin, and Gauthier, 1997).

The size of the scale you use also depends on what makes sense and is most helpful to you. How will you interpret scores which are neutral? If giving participants a neutral choice doesn't make sense to you in the interpretation of the data, then don't do it. If you can easily interpret what they are saying when they choose that midpoint, then allow people the option of sitting on the fence if you feel their views may be moderate in nature.

As you've probably noted from the above, conducting research can be as easy as using a combination of what the experts say and what would be best for your study. Whether you use expert opinion or your own, you need to justify why you chose which path and stick with it throughout the study. Switching part way through the study defeats the image of researchers as tedious and predictable; it also threatens the integrity of your study.

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Lambert, Blais, Potvin, & Gauthier (1997). Effects of a neutral answer choice on the reliability and validity of attitude and opinion items. The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 12(2), 61-80.

Streiner, D.L. & Norman, G.R. (1995). Health Measurement scales: A practical guide to their development and use (Second Edition). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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