

# Surveying the Neighbourhood: How Globally Informed Are We?

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## Getting the Data

When conducting a survey of this nature, the researcher tries to learn what the test subject thinks or knows about the topic or how they behave under some conditions. There are two basic methods for obtaining information about the test subjects – questioning and observing. Questioning can range from qualitative to quantitative research. And many kinds of observing are possible.

Qualitative research seeks in-depth, open-ended responses, not yes or no answers. The researcher tries to get people to share their thoughts on a topic – without giving them many directions or guidelines about what to say.

A researcher might ask different test subjects, “What do you think about when you decide where to go shopping for food?” One person may talk about convenient location, another about service, and others about the quality of the fresh produce. The real advantage of this approach is depth. Each person can be asked follow-up questions so the researcher really understands what that respondent is thinking. The depth of the qualitative approach gets at the details, even if the researcher needs a lot of judgment to summarize it all.

Some types of qualitative research don’t use specific questions. For example, a picture may be shown and the respondent may be asked to explain what is happening or may be asked to comment on the situation depicted in the photo.

While qualitative research has many supporters, the techniques have limits, even in the hands of a talented researcher. There are also no substitutes for the hard facts and numbers that quantitative studies generate. Qualitative research can provide good ideas and hypotheses.

When researchers use identical questions and alternative responses, they can summarize the information quantitatively. Samples can be larger and more representative, and they can use various statistics to draw conclusions. For these reasons most survey research is quantitative research – which seeks structured responses that can be summarized in numbers, like percentages, averages, or other statistics. For example, a researcher may calculate what percentage of respondents get their daily news from the Toronto Sun or Toronto Star newspapers.

Survey questionnaires usually provide fixed responses to questions to simplify analysis of the replies. This multiple-choice approach makes it easier and faster for the respondent to reply. Simple fill-in-the-blank questions are also widely used in quantitative research. A questionnaire might ask a respondent how many times a week they watch the evening news. Fixed responses are also more convenient for computer analysis, which is how most surveys are analyzed.

One common approach to measuring respondents' attitudes and opinions is to have the respondents indicate how much they agree or disagree with a questionnaire statement.

Another approach is to have respondents rate statements. Sometimes, rating scales are labelled with adjectives like excellent, good, fair and poor or always, sometimes, seldom or never.

### **Interpreting the Data**

After someone collects the data, it has to be analyzed to decide what it all means. In quantitative research, this step usually involves statistics.

Cross tabulation is one of the most frequently used approaches to analyzing and interpreting research data. It shows the relationship of answers to two different questions.

It is usually impossible for researchers to collect all the information they want about everyone in the population. Therefore, researchers typically study only a sample, part of the relevant population. How well a sample represents the total population affects the results. Results from a sample that is not representative may not give a true picture.

### **Assignment**

1. Brainstorm a list of questions that would test the degree to which the school community is informed about world issues.
2. As a class, we will select 7-10 questions to create a survey that everyone will use.
3. Each student will survey at least 10 people outside of class (but do not interrupt other classes!)
4. The results will be tallied and discussed in class.
5. Write a one page reflective journal regarding the results of the survey.
  - a. Were you surprised by the results? Why or why not?
  - b. Comment on the public's knowledge of global events and happenings and why we are not generally more informed.
  - c. How could we be more informed?