

AVOID OVERLY LONG QUESTIONNAIRES

Written by:

Carey V. Azzara

Principal

carey.azzara@atheath.com

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Abstract

Your goal is to create a pristine research instrument (RI); one that optimizes your ability to address the research objectives and minimizes errors and unintended biases. One important task is to monitor the length of your research instruments. Use the two-step timing process described in this document to avoid overly long questionnaires and to help manage the project and set appropriate expectations.

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15 Hull Street, Newton, MA 02460
Telephone: 508.400.6837

Time to Complete a Research Instrument (RI)

The Overly Long RI

Basic Premise – Always look for the greatest return from the time and space that defines the overall length of a questionnaire.

RI “**Real Estate**” should apply the same concept as actual real estate – always strive for the most value: **Find the highest and best use.**

An overly long [more than 20 minutes and sometimes 15 minutes] RI is more than just a burden on your respondent it can create a sampling bias that could hurt your chances of presenting valid insights. Think for a moment about the type of respondents you want in your study. Do you want a sample disproportionately filled with people who have plenty of time to spend answering your questions or do you want people who are busy, but willing to spend a reasonable amount of time as a respondent?

I think I know your answer.

If the RI is long and some of the most desirable respondents drop out because they feel you’ve asked too much from them, what happens to your ability to generalize the results to the larger market?

The answer is: The sample may have been compromised and a bias of unknown nature or magnitude has been created. Obviously there are many dangers regarding the introduction of bias, our job as researchers is to minimize those risks.

An overly long RI can increase the risk of bias.

How do you know if the RI is too long? Testing the length of your RI should happen at three points during RI design and development:

1. When you begin writing the RI you should not be concerned with length; your concern is to understand the research requirements and how best to meet those requirements. However, as you refine the architecture and approach the conclusion of integrating inputs from various sources (e.g., clients, colleagues, and the literature) you want to consider length and have an approximation.
2. If you have completed a draft of the RI and you are sending it to clients for review it usually helps to let them know the status of the current length. Can they still add questions? Can they only add questions if other questions are deleted? Should they prioritize the questions and mark low value questions for deletion?

3. Finally, you need to know the length (time to complete) to receive accurate cost estimates from field partners.

Maximum Survey Length

To estimate the length of a questionnaire you can use this quick rule of thumb: Divide the total number of questions by 2.5; the result is the length in minutes (Table 1). If the RI uses multipart questions and a number of attribute batteries you may want to adjust the ratio to 2 questions per minute. Obviously, this rule of thumb is very rough and subject to a fairly large error rate since it does not take into account the complexity of the questions. Nevertheless, it does provide a rough gage.

If you're shooting for a 10 minute RI than you can have about 25 questions, 15 minute RI about 37-38 questions, and a 20 minute RI tops out at about 50 questions. If the RI uses multipart questions and a number of attribute batteries you may want to adjust the ratio to 2 questions per minute (10 minutes=20 questions, 15 minutes =30 questions and 20 minutes = 40 questions). Use these approximations to set expectations early in the RI development phase of the study.

Estimated Minutes	<u>Number of Questions</u>	
	Low Complexity	High Complexity
10	25	20
15	37-38	30
20	50	40
22	55	44

Timing Before and After Programming

Ultimately you will need a more precise estimation of questionnaire length. Before and after the RI is programmed you should test it by having someone unfamiliar with the instrument read it as if they were a respondent. The process is outlined below.

Time-test Before Programming

Before programming the time-testers must use the text version of the RI. Have the time-testers follow these five (5) steps:

1. Use an online stop watch*. Start with the introduction and read it carefully
2. Have the time tester read each question and all the answer options selecting items or ratings etc. as if they were taking the survey online.
3. Stop the stopwatch if there is an interruption or you find a problem and want to write a note
4. Restart the stopwatch when you are about to begin reading the RI again.
5. Record the final time immediately after completing it

*You can find online versions of stopwatch that are very handy for this exercise - this one is straightforward and easy to use: <http://tools.arantius.com/stopwatch>

It can also be helpful to know the time it takes to complete each major section of an instrument. Use the same procedure as above, stop the stopwatch and record the time to complete each section immediately. Then restart the stopwatch and proceed to the next section of the RI.

If there have been a large number of stops and restarts the accuracy of the timing may have been compromised. To correct for this possibility have the testers repeat the exercise without stopping to time each section or write notes. Compare the first and second times recorded and judge the true length. The second time may be artificially low due to practice. To avoid this problem have the time tester go through the entire RI first and time the sections on a second round.

It's best to have two or three people do this exercise and see if the times are roughly equal. Obviously if the times recorded between testers are within a few minutes of one another your confidence in the estimate will be high. However, if the times recorded are very different your comfort level may be low and more testing will be required.

Before retesting talk with each tester individually and ask them to please describe their experiences:

1. Was the timing process easy or hard to do?
2. Was the RI easy or hard to complete?
3. Was there a particular section or question that was problematic?
4. Did the questions make sense to you?

5. Do you consider yourself a fast reader or about average or perhaps a little slower than average? (You may want them to volunteer the fact that they are a slow reader – this can be a sensitive topic for people).
6. Did anything that happened during the testing process, which could pose a problem related to the accuracy of the time test?

Once you are satisfied you have a reasonably accurate estimate of length the next step is to decide if the length is within an acceptable range. You will want a precise estimation before the RI is programmed. If the RI is clearly too long to field make adjustments now before it's programmed, you'll save time and money. Testing and retesting is much quicker and less expensive than programming and reprogramming

Time-test After Programming

Once the RI is programmed repeat the timing exercise outlined in the previous section. The only difference will be the venue. Instead of reading a word document the testers are now completing the questionnaire in the same venue the respondents will be using, that is, the online programmed version.

NOTE: Your post-programmed timing-test will be more accurate if the RI programming has been tested and passed all the checks – See the eBook [Power of a Questionnaire QC Plan: Timing and Testing](#)

At this point you will have a very good idea of the length of time it takes to complete your RI. You can now determine whether you need to make any final cuts and, if necessary, how much will need to be cut.

Or perhaps you will have the luxury of adding questions. After a time-test occasionally you can add questions you once thought there was no room to include and you will know how many you can add (unfortunately this rarely happens).

Spending the effort to time the instrument and keep the length within appropriate limits is critical. Not only is it important from the perspective of overall questionnaire quality and ultimately the quality of the data, it's also an important tool for managing expectations. Managing expectations is about having happy clients when the project is completed.

Use the Longest Path

If your RI has skip logic or branching, pick the longest path and time that path. Estimate the time in minutes for the longest path, that is, the path through the skip logic that will require the most time, which is typically, but not always the path with largest number of questions.

Ideally none of the respondents is asked to take on too difficult a task. Depending on the architecture of the RI you may have more flexibility in one path through the RI than another.

If you have the resources to time each path you can obtain useful information. While the longest path may already be too long or at the limit other paths may be short enough to add questions. Examine your options and to make wise decisions always balance the length against the highest priority objectives of the study.

Best of Luck!

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Call Carey Azzara at 508.400.6837

Or send an email to: info@AtHeath.com

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