



Survey Response Categories: Guide for Using Neutral or N/A Options¹

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Purpose

Researchers struggle with selecting the appropriate categories for their survey response scales, specifically whether to include *neutral* and *n/a* options. This paper addresses this survey design decision and offers guidance for choosing these categories when drafting survey questions. For the purposes of this discussion, this paper will examine the basic Likert response type with a 5-category scale. Alternative Likert responses types with scales other than a 5-category scale will be the focus of a follow-on article.

Response Category Options

For 5-category Likert scales, particularly those that range from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, there are four basic response category options (see Figure 1 for examples) to choose from:

- A. Likert forced choice (no *neutral* or *n/a*)
- B. Likert with neutral category (no *n/a*)
- C. Likert forced choice with *n/a* category
- D. Likert with *neutral* and *n/a* categories

A.	Strongly Disagree ①	Disagree ②	Agree ③	Strongly Agree ④		
B.	Strongly Disagree ①	Disagree ②	Neutral ③	Agree ④	Strongly Agree ⑤	
C.	Strongly Disagree ①	Disagree ②	Agree ③	Strongly Agree ④	N/A ○	
D.	Strongly Disagree ①	Disagree ②	Neutral ③	Agree ④	Strongly Agree ⑤	N/A ○

Figure 1. Likert examples

All four survey response category options are legitimate and produce data that can be used effectively in statistical analysis. However, the presence or absence of a neutral category can

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produce distortions in the data obtained (Garland, 1991). A researcher wants the most reliable data possible, so to determine which option to use, a researcher should address the following two questions:

1. Is it reasonable that the respondent is familiar with the topic of the survey item?
2. Is it reasonable to think that the respondent should have an opinion one way or another about the topic of the survey item?

Respondent Familiarity

The first question explores whether to use the *n/a* category option. Fowler (2009) refers to this category as the “don’t know” option. Some researchers caution that when respondents are asked questions about their own lives, feelings, or experiences and a “don’t know” option is offered, it allows the respondent to avoid the work required to give the answer. However, other researchers argue that sometimes there are things asked that the respondent legitimately lacks the knowledge about it. The further the topic is from the immediate experience of the respondent, the more plausible that some respondents would have inadequate knowledge or sufficient familiarity to have formed an opinion about the topic.

Another way for the researcher to determine if the *n/a* option is warranted is to consider whether the survey item concerns a topic that all members of the group are familiar with. If it does, then it is unnecessary to offer the *n/a* option. However, if it only applies to some of the respondents in the group, then include the *n/a* option. But when a large number of *n/a* responses are anticipated, then the researcher should consider why they are asking that question in the first place. In this case, it may be better to consider writing the survey item in a way that everyone in the group could answer.

Respondent Opinion

The second question addresses whether to include a *neutral* category. The *neutral* category could be *neither agree or disagree*, *agree or disagree equally*, or some other variant of the *neutral* response. Fink (2003) suggests only including a *neutral* category if it is valid. Some researchers suggest that *neutral* categories provide respondents with an excuse for not answering. However, some respondents resent not having a *neutral* option. For this reason, a researcher should avoid the risk of getting respondents frustrated and disengaged from the survey. Respondents that are engaged in the survey items yield the most reliable data.

Garland (1991) suggested that “the way in which people will respond to a balanced Likert type scale with a mid-point is content specific” (p. 67). So how does a researcher determine if the *neutral* category is warranted? The answer is indeed subjective, but a good guideline to use is to consider if the survey item concerns an assessment of the respondent individually (or as part of a group) or an assessment of some other group or topic. For example, say your spouse plays the

role of a researcher and surveys your mood for dinner asking “do you want *Italian* or *seafood* tonight?” Providing a *neutral* or *no preference* response adds no value your spouse’s decision-making. Since the question is asking you to assessing your individual preference or attitude, then you should be forced to answer one of the two options provided. However, there are times where survey items concern something other than an individual preference or attitude.

For example, as an election approaches, a researcher may survey respondents to select which of two candidates is best qualified. A respondent could legitimately and objectively assess that both candidates are equally qualified. Therefore, a *neutral* or *equally qualified* category is warranted. However, if a researcher asks the respondents to select which candidate would they vote for, then that reflects a personal assessment that is normally based on subjective factors rather than objective factors. The researcher is only offering one vote in this survey election, so the respondent must pick one or the other as a measure of their preference. Thus, for two questions about a candidate, a researcher could get two different answers from the same respondent. Which is correct? Again, it depends on what the researcher is trying to measure: perceptions of candidate qualification levels or measures of potential voter preferences.

Response Category Guideline

When drafting your survey items, use the chart in Figure 2 to determine the appropriate Likert scale to use.

		2. Is it reasonable to think that the respondent should have an <u>opinion</u> about the topic?	
		Yes	No
1. Is it reasonable that the respondent is <u>familiar</u> with the topic?	Yes	Likert forced choice (A)	Likert with neutral (B)
	No	Likert forced choice with n/a (C)	Likert with neutral and n/a (D)

Figure 2. Guideline for choosing neutral or n/a survey categories

If stuck, do not obsess over the options. It is recommended to go with your best guess and then test for face validity by having test respondents that are similar to the actual respondents that the survey instrument is intended for. Their feedback will help guide your decision in what categories to include. Remember, testing repeatedly is the best way to ensure the validity of the survey instrument and the reliability of the data collected. Also keep in mind that, as Garland

(1991) noted, the use of *neutral* and *n/a* categories remains largely a factor based on individual researcher preference.

References

Fink, A. (2003). *How to ask survey questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fowler, R. J. (2009). *Survey research methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Garland, R. (1991). The mid-point on a rating scale: Is it desirable? *Marketing Bulletin*, 2(3), 66-70. Retrieved at <http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz>