

Opinion survey

You have found the subject for your historical research project. Now you must consider how to find answers to your questions. An opinion survey is a good method for discovering how people today think about aspects of your subject or what they know about it. Such a survey is especially worthwhile if your subject still plays a role in people's lives – for example, when you are writing about a monument or a building located in your town that people think they know. However, in order to enquire about data, facts and also personal memories of the past, you must choose other methods – e.g., reading and interpreting written source materials and interviewing eyewitnesses.

The following tips will help you conduct your opinion survey successfully.

1. Preparation

- A carefully worded questionnaire is one of the keys to success. Hence you should consider exactly what you want to learn from your survey and formulate the questions accordingly.
- Limit yourselves to a few questions, so that your questionnaire doesn't take up more than one page.
- Try to compose your questionnaire so that the interviewees can keep their answers as short as possible; if necessary, you can also note down the answers yourselves.
- You can distinguish between closed or open questions:
 - With closed questions, you specify possible answers to your questions and the interviewee chooses one of them. You can easily analyse closed questions statistically.
 - With open questions, the interviewee formulates the answer in his own words. The answers provide you with a substantial amount of information but are more difficult to evaluate. Therefore the number of open questions should be limited.
 - You can combine closed and open questions. For example, with closed questions you can offer the possibility of giving a personal response that is not included among the enumerated answers.
- At the beginning or end of the questionnaire, questions are posed about the person being surveyed. Just as with an interview, you should think carefully about what interests you before posing the questions. If the personal data about a particular person is not important to you, you can use an anonymous questionnaire.
- The best way to compose your questionnaire is on a computer.

Composing the
questionnaire



Example of a questionnaire:

"Our neighbourhood in the 1950s"

Age _____

Sex _____

Profession (doesn't have to be answered) _____

Since when have you lived in this neighbourhood? _____

How old were you when you moved here? _____

What do you especially remember about it? _____

Were there already immigrants in this neighbourhood in the 1950s and '60s? _____

Did you have contact with immigrants? _____

Do you still remember the store XY? If so, please give a specific description of it. _____

Do you still remember the event XY? If so, please give a specific description of it. _____

What do you think has especially changed in this neighbourhood? _____

Thank you for taking the time to reply!

2. Conducting the survey

There are numbers of ways of conducting a survey. You can send out a questionnaire, which the interviewees later send back to you. But you will have to pay postal charges. It is simpler and cheaper to question people personally, e.g., passers-by on the street or fellow students.

- If you decide to question people directly, then briefly describe at the beginning of the conversation the goal of your survey, and introduce yourselves and your project. It is possible that the people you ask may not want to be questioned. Then thank them politely and look for other conversation partners.
- Take along pens. It's better if you yourselves note down the interviewees' answers in the questionnaire. That increases people's willingness to participate in your survey.
- Thank the interviewees at the end for their cooperation!

Conducting the survey

3. Evaluation

You can summarize the collected information in a chart or present it graphically in a diagram. Tips for the evaluation of the results of your opinion survey you will find in the Work Sheet "Reading statistics".

The evaluation