

## Questionnaire Pretest Procedures

**Note:** *This guidance is designed to ensure that GAO policies on evidence and generally accepted government auditing standards are met. The guidance conforms to the generally accepted principles and practices of the appropriate disciplines. Statements that particular actions “should” be taken are practices that are expected to be followed, unless there are good reasons for not doing so. Before deviating from a practice expressed as a “should” statement, staff members must consult with an appropriate staff member in Applied Research and Methods (ARM) or a team specialist and must document the consultation.*

Pre-testing questionnaires is an essential step in the survey development process. Our goal with pretesting is to increase the validity and reliability of our testimonial survey evidence. When pretesting questionnaires, we focus on how people are answering our questions since there are a number of different processes our respondents may be experiencing when they are answering our questions. In the end, we want to ensure that respondents interpret and answer questions in the way in which our research intended. Pretesting will help us determine if respondents understand the questions as well as if they can perform the tasks or have the information that questions require. Pre-tests also provide the most direct evidence for the validity of the questionnaire data for most items.

Our questionnaire pretest procedure uses a cognitive interviewing approach because it provides a view of how respondents process their questionnaire responses. There are a number of ways to conduct a cognitive interview – by asking verbal probes or by asking respondents to ‘think aloud’ as they formulate an answer to the questionnaire (concurrently) or after completing the questionnaire (retrospectively). We typically use a retrospective approach with verbal probes and this process is described below. The retrospective approach with debriefing is most often used because we can observe respondents navigating and reacting to the questionnaire without interruption and can more accurately measure the amount of time respondents complete the questionnaire. The concurrent probing and concurrent ‘think aloud’ techniques can be useful for conducting pretests by telephone.

Please note that ARM teaches a course through the Learning Center on a periodic, and as needed, basis. Check the course calendar in the [Training Registration Resource System \(TRRS\)](#) for scheduled dates.

Please consult your ARM Stakeholder on your engagement, or [ARM Coordinator to your Mission Team](#), for help and guidance with pre-testing questionnaires.

### PROCEDURES

The following discussion provides a general overview of the process and suggests procedures to follow to execute effective pre-tests. This process involves asking the respondent to complete the questionnaire and afterwards ask questions during a debriefing period with the respondent

## **Selecting respondents**

In selecting respondents for pretesting, there are several considerations that should be made. -- You want pretest respondents to be like or similar to those who will actually be your respondents. Thus, you should consider the range of respondents for the actual questionnaire. This is generally not a “random selection” process.

Your goal in the pretest process should be to get varied pretest experiences from different possible groups of respondents, including those who may understand or react to the questions in different ways, who have different levels of information available, or who have different abilities to answer the questionnaire— different education levels, or different experiences. You don't need to plan to analyze any of the results by these different kinds of people but you should do your best to make sure that everyone in your population can complete the questionnaire.

Optimally, pretests are conducted in-person. However, our budget and resources, including time constraints, may have implications for your selection. Geographic dispersion is often desired because of the potential for a variety of practices by location, so with limited resources, you may have to consider different options to achieve that dispersion. Alternatives that can be employed when you have limited resources and time include:

- Pretests over the telephone rather than in person (although you will not be as able to observe the respondent);
- Pretests with in-person locals (this will allow face-to-face pretests although you will sacrifice some geographical dispersion); and,
- Other options such as clustering your pretests so you can do more than one in a single location; and when necessary, conducting pretests with small groups of people at once— either in person or by phone.

## **Scheduling appointments with respondents**

After identifying and recruiting respondents to participate, you should make an appointment with the pre-test respondent allowing about 2 to 3 times much time for the pretest as you feel it should take to just complete the questionnaire. In other words, a survey that is estimated to take 20 minutes to complete would probably require at least an hour to pretest the instrument. Typically, pretests sessions last from 1 ½ to 2 hours. When making the appointment, make it very clear to the pretest subject that this is to just pretest the survey instrument as part of the development and planning stages. You may want to convey that we are interested in the subject's reaction to and understanding of the questions and need their assistance to help us improve the instrument before we send it out to collect actual responses. We are not as concerned with their actual answers at this point, but rather how and if they would be able to answer the questions as intended.

## **Attending and conducting the pretest session**

An analyst knowledgeable about the subject matter of the job should always accompany the questionnaire specialist to the pretest to help answer content related questions that pretest respondents often have. When arriving at the pretest location, the analyst should provide the

subject with a brief description of the job and the reasons we are planning to conduct a survey. The questionnaire specialist should then provide a brief description of the pretest procedures to the subject. In most cases, the questionnaire specialist will want the pretest subject to go through the entire questionnaire, filling in the responses and noting any problems with the questions as they go along. They will provide specific instructions, as well as a copy of the instrument, to the respondent when beginning the pretest. They will inform the subject what to do when going through the instrument as well as what how they plan to debrief and discuss issues about the questionnaire after the respondent has completed the questionnaire.

During the pretest the GAO team should situate themselves near the pretest subject so that they can observe the subject completing the questionnaire. As the subject completes the questionnaire, the GAO team should make brief notes indicating the approximate time it takes to complete each page or section within the questionnaire. Potential problem questions can be identified by noting erasures, skipped questions, misread or overlooked instructions, questions that take an unusually long time to answer, and questions that evoke some sort of reaction such as a grimace or sigh. Inconsistencies in the responses should also be noted and discussed later on.

When the pretest subject is finished, the questionnaire specialist leading the interview will ask the respondent if they would like to take a short break. The interviewer may ask to review the completed survey or may just go through question by question during the debriefing.

Typically, the interviewer (with assistance from the team) will have predeveloped probes throughout the questionnaire to ask the respondent when going through the instrument question by question. These probes are developed for those questions in which problems may be anticipated or for questions they want to learn more about the level of effort required to answer specific questions. Before going through the questionnaire, the interviewer will first ask the respondent about their general impressions of the survey – what they think we’re trying to find out, whether or not the survey seems objective and non-biased, and if there were specific questions they found problematic. In going through the survey, the interviewer will ask the respondent about possible problematic questions – what they thought the question was asking, if the response options were clear and exhaustive, etc. During this debriefing, the interviewer will ask about any potential problems they observed while the subject was completing the questionnaire (e.g., blanks, mistakes, erasures, questions that look a long time to complete or appeared overly difficult, etc.). At this point, the interviewer may call upon team members to ask if they observed any other issues during the pretest session.

After the instrument has been sufficiently and comprehensively reviewed, a few general questions are asked about the questionnaire before ending the pretest meeting. These questions may include:

- Was the questionnaire comprehensive? Did we adequately cover the topic (or how adequately was the topic covered)?
- Are there any questions you expected that we would ask and that we didn’t?
- Are there any questions you feel may be too sensitive or that may affect our response rate that we should consider deleting?

- Was the questionnaire too long, too short, or about right?
- Had the subject received the questionnaire in the mail, how likely or unlikely would they be at completing and returning the questionnaire to GAO?

It is always good form to close out the pretest by thanking the pretest subject and telling them that they may or may not receive a final questionnaire (depending of course if they are in the final sample). If they are likely to be selected as a respondent, indicate your appreciation, as well as the importance, for them to complete the questionnaire. Reiterate that their responses, and related discussion, during this pretest will not be used in any way other than to help improve the instrument.