A Brief Guide to the Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Questions

Open-ended questions on questionnaires elaborate responses to closed questions and offer insights or issues not captured in the closed questions. Generally, techniques developed for analyzing qualitative data are used to analyze the responses to open-ended questions. Through the analysis, researchers examine patterns and trends in the responses so that they reach certain conclusions. Here, we provide several general steps that you would attempt for the analysis of your open-ended responses.

1. Read carefully the responses.
We recommend that you read through each response carefully at least twice. As you read through the responses, you may see some common themes emerging.

2. Develop coding categories.
The second step is to develop categories for the different themes you are seeing. Codes or coding categories are a means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected so that the material bearing on a given topic can be physically separated from other data. When you read the responses, you can see some patterns in the responses as well as topics the responses cover. Then, you write down words and phrases to represent these patterns and topics. These words and phrases are coding categories. For example, with a question asking for student’s opinion about the greatest strength of the philosophy department (question #53), you may be able to group responses into categories such as “faculty”, “staff”, “course materials”, “class”, etc. There are several coding families commonly used in qualitative data analyses and the definitions and examples of them are as follows.

- **Setting/context codes**: The most general information on the setting, topic, or subjects. For example, “descriptions of the Philosophy department at Cerritos College.”
- **Situation codes**: How the subjects define the setting or particular topics. For example, “faculty’s view on their work.”
- **Perspectives held by subjects**: Shared rules and norms as well as general point of view. For example, “The faculty members are excellent.”
- **Subjects’ way of thinking about people and objects**: The subjects’ understandings of each other, of outsiders, and of the objects that make up their world. For example, “students’ view of faculty.”
- **Process codes**: Sequences of events, changes over time, or passages from one type or kind of status to another. For example, “the process of dropping out of course.”
- **Activity codes**: Regularly occurring kinds of behavior. For example, “students’ visits to the faculty’s office.”
- **Event codes**: Particular happenings that occur infrequently or only once. For example, “graduation.”
- **Relationship and social structure codes**: Regular patterns of behavior among people. For example, “student friendships.”

3. **Label each response with one or more coding categories.**

After you generate coding categories, assign at least one category to each response. This may be best done in an Excel sheet with responses in one column and coding category/categories in the next column.

4. **Look at what you have and do sub-coding.**

In the example about student’s opinion about the strength of the philosophy department, you might label half of the responses as “faculty”. Then, you can divide the responses on “faculty” into smaller categories (i.e., sub-coding categories), for example, “knowledge”, “enthusiasm”, “office hours”, “advising”, etc. By doing this, you will start to see what are the patterns and trends in the responses and the main issues raised by your students.

5. **Think about what the responses mean and identify the patterns and trends.**

Once you have categorized and coded data, you should explain what is being said about the subject or theme. You can then see what categories are related, where trends and patterns can be identified, and if there are common themes emerging. In the same example above, you might see the patterns that majority of student respondents perceive human resources in the Philosophy department (i.e., professors, instructors, and administrative staffs) as the greatest strength of the department.

6. **Write up the analysis.**

Once you have analyzed the responses and identified the major patterns and trends, the next step is to write a summary of what you have found. This would be a descriptive text incorporating narratives directly from the respondents. Here is an example for the writing:

**The greatest strength of the Philosophy department at Cerritos College (Question #53)**

Regarding the strength of the Philosophy department, more than half of the respondents spoke about faculty. The most prevalent theme raised included the knowledge and enthusiasm of and accessibility to faculty in the department. The following comments from respondents are some examples that illustrate this point:

““The instructors. The instructor that I have is amazing, she is very helpful, and knows what she is taking about”.
““The instructor. He is very passionate, and educated on the subject that he teaches”.
““Faculty seem interested and committed to the success of the students in the course”.
““Easy access to teacher’s offices”.
““The faculty are accessible to the students needs”.

---

2
Course materials used in the classes were another common theme raised by students to demonstrate the strength of the department.

“A good book for the class. Plus teachers that love the subject”.
“They have great material for course related”.

A few respondents reported diversity of classes offered as the strength.

“Great schedule. Flexible and convenient for students variety of classes”.
“Choices of classes, variety”.