

Questionnaire: A Comprehensive Guide

Types • Methods • Advantages • Disadvantages • Social Work Examples

1. Meaning of a Questionnaire

A questionnaire is one of the most widely used tools for collecting data in social science and social work research. It is a set of written or printed questions arranged in a systematic order, which respondents answer on their own (self-administered) or with the help of a researcher. It is designed to gather factual information, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour from a group of people in a standardised way.

The term questionnaire comes from the French word questionnaire, meaning 'a set of questions.' In research, a questionnaire is not just a list of random questions — it is a carefully designed instrument that collects specific, relevant, and reliable data to answer a research question or test a hypothesis.

A questionnaire can be used on its own or alongside other methods such as interviews or observation. It is especially useful when a researcher needs data from a large number of people spread across a wide geographical area.

Example:

A social work researcher studying awareness of government welfare schemes among Below Poverty Line (BPL) families in rural Rajasthan designs a questionnaire with 20 questions covering awareness, access, and utilisation of schemes like PM Awas Yojana and MGNREGA. The questionnaire is printed in Hindi and distributed to 500 households.

2. Key Characteristics of a Good Questionnaire

- **Clarity:** Questions must be clear, simple, and easy to understand.
- **Relevance:** Every question must be directly linked to the research objective.
- **Brevity:** The questionnaire should not be too long — respondents lose interest.
- **Logical sequence:** Questions should flow from general to specific.
- **Unbiased language:** Questions must not lead the respondent to a particular answer.
- **Completeness:** It should cover all aspects needed to answer the research question.

- Validity and reliability: The tool must measure what it intends to measure, consistently.

3. Types of Questionnaire by Structure

The most fundamental classification of questionnaires is based on their degree of structure — that is, how much freedom the respondent has in answering.

3.1 Structured Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire uses closed-ended questions with predetermined answer options. All respondents answer the same questions in the same way, making the data easy to compare, count, and analyse statistically. It is the most formal and standardised type.

Structured questionnaires are ideal for large-scale, quantitative research where the researcher already knows the key variables and wants to measure them precisely across a large population.

Example:

A government social welfare department wants to evaluate the satisfaction of beneficiaries of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme across 10 districts. A structured questionnaire is given to 2,000 mothers with questions like: 'Do you receive supplementary nutrition from the anganwadi? (Yes/No)' and 'How satisfied are you with the services? (Very satisfied / Satisfied / Neutral / Dissatisfied / Very Dissatisfied)'

Advantages of Structured Questionnaire

- ✓ Easy to administer to large groups simultaneously.
- ✓ Responses are standardised, easy to compare and code.
- ✓ Can be analysed quantitatively using statistical tools.
- ✓ Requires less time from both researcher and respondent.
- ✓ Reduces researcher bias since answers are pre-coded.
- ✓ Suitable for illiterate populations when researcher reads it aloud.

Disadvantages of Structured Questionnaire

- ✗ Does not allow respondents to express their views in their own words.
- ✗ May miss important information not covered by the fixed options.
- ✗ Respondents may choose an option that is 'close enough' rather than accurate.
- ✗ Not suitable for complex, sensitive, or exploratory topics.
- ✗ Pre-set options reflect the researcher's assumptions, not the respondent's reality.

3.2 Unstructured Questionnaire

An unstructured questionnaire uses open-ended questions that allow respondents to answer in their own words, at any length, and from their own perspective. There are no fixed options — the respondent writes, speaks, or types a free-form answer. This type provides rich, deep, qualitative data but is harder to analyse.

Unstructured questionnaires are most useful in exploratory research, where the researcher does not yet know what the key themes or variables will be, or when studying complex human experiences.

Example:

A social work researcher studying the experiences of domestic violence survivors in shelter homes gives them an unstructured questionnaire with questions like: 'How has your life changed after coming to this shelter?' and 'What kind of support do you feel you still need?' Survivors write detailed personal narratives, revealing themes the researcher had not anticipated.

Advantages of Unstructured Questionnaire

- ✓ Captures the depth, richness, and complexity of human experience.
- ✓ Respondents can express views the researcher had not anticipated.
- ✓ Ideal for exploratory, sensitive, or complex research topics.
- ✓ Gives voice to marginalised populations in their own words.
- ✓ Can generate new hypotheses and theories (inductive approach).

Disadvantages of Unstructured Questionnaire

- ✗ Very difficult and time-consuming to analyse.
- ✗ Responses are not comparable across respondents.
- ✗ Requires higher literacy and articulation from respondents.
- ✗ Researcher bias can enter during interpretation of open answers.
- ✗ Not suitable for large-scale quantitative studies.

3.3 Semi-Structured Questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire combines both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Some questions have fixed answer options (for standardised, comparable data), while others invite the respondent to elaborate freely (for depth and nuance). It strikes a balance between quantitative measurement and qualitative insight.

This is the most commonly used type in social work research because real-world social problems are complex — they need both statistical data (how many? how often?) and personal narratives (why? how does it feel?).

Example:

A social work researcher studying child labour in carpet-weaving units in Uttar Pradesh uses a semi-structured questionnaire. Closed questions cover: age, hours of work, wages, whether they attend school. Open questions ask: 'Why did you start working?' and 'What do you wish was different about your life?' This gives both countable data and personal stories.

Advantages of Semi-Structured Questionnaire

- ✓ Provides both quantitative data and qualitative depth in one tool.
- ✓ More flexible — allows unexpected issues to surface.
- ✓ Easier to analyse than fully unstructured questionnaires.
- ✓ More informative than fully structured ones.
- ✓ Suitable for most social work research contexts.

Disadvantages of Semi-Structured Questionnaire

- ✗ More complex to design than purely structured questionnaires.
- ✗ Analysis requires both statistical and qualitative skills.
- ✗ Longer than structured questionnaires — may reduce response rate.
- ✗ Open-ended sections may be left blank by less engaged respondents.

4. Types of Questions Used in Questionnaires

Beyond the overall structure, questionnaires differ by the type of individual questions they use. Each question type serves a specific research purpose.

4.1 Closed-Ended Questions

Closed-ended questions provide specific answer choices. Respondents select from predetermined options. They produce quantitative data.

A) Dichotomous Questions

These offer only two mutually exclusive options — typically Yes/No, True/False, or Agree/Disagree. They are the simplest form of closed-ended question and are used for quick screening or binary facts.

Example:

'Are you currently receiving widow pension from the government? ☐ Yes ☐ No' Used in a social work study to identify eligible but excluded widows in a district.

B) Multiple-Choice Questions

Respondents choose one or more answers from a list of options. These are highly versatile and widely used in social research to capture categories, preferences, or behaviours.

Example:

'What is the main reason your child does not attend school? ☐ Financial reasons ☐ Child has to work ☐ School is too far ☐ No interest in studies ☐ Family does not allow ☐ Other' Used in a school dropout study in tribal areas.

C) Rating Scale / Likert Scale Questions

These questions ask respondents to rate their opinion, attitude, or experience on a numeric or descriptive scale. The Likert Scale (1 to 5, or Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) is the most widely used format in social science research.

Example:

'The social worker at the child welfare centre treats clients with respect and dignity.' ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree Used in a study measuring client satisfaction with social services.

4.2 Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions do not restrict the respondent's answer. The respondent writes or speaks freely in their own words. These capture qualitative depth, personal experiences, and unexpected insights.

Example:

'Describe the biggest challenge you face as a single mother in accessing government welfare services.' This question allows women to raise issues the researcher may never have thought to ask about — such as language barriers, harassment at offices, or lack of childcare during visits.

4.3 Mixed Questionnaire

A mixed questionnaire combines both open and closed-ended questions. It is the most common format in applied social work research, providing both statistical data and personal narratives in a single instrument.

Example:

A study on elder abuse combines: • Closed: 'Has anyone in your family shouted at you in the past month? (Yes/No)' • Open: 'If yes, can you describe what happened?' The closed question gives a count; the open question gives context and meaning.

4.4 Pictorial Questionnaire

A pictorial questionnaire uses images, drawings, emoticons, or symbols instead of (or alongside) written text. Respondents point to, circle, or mark the image that best represents their response. This format is especially valuable when working with children, people with low literacy, or populations who communicate better through visuals.

Example:

A social worker studying the emotional wellbeing of children in a juvenile home shows them a row of five faces ranging from very sad 😞 to very happy 😊 and asks: 'Which face shows how you feel about staying here?' Children point to the face that reflects their feeling — no words required.

- ✓ Overcomes literacy barriers — accessible to children and illiterate respondents.
- ✓ Reduces misunderstanding from language or vocabulary differences.
- ✓ Increases engagement and response rate, especially with children.
- ✓ Can capture emotional states that are difficult to put into words.

- ✗ Limited in the complexity of information it can collect.
- ✗ Images may be interpreted differently across cultures.
- ✗ Time-consuming to design with appropriate and culturally sensitive images.
- ✗ Not suitable for detailed factual or complex attitudinal data.

5. Types by Method of Administration

The same questionnaire can be administered in different ways depending on the research context, population, available resources, and geographical spread.

5.1 Self-Administered Questionnaire

The respondent fills in the questionnaire independently, without any help from the researcher. This is the most common form in large-scale studies.

- Online / Electronic Survey: Distributed via Google Forms, email, social media, or survey platforms. Fast, cheap, and wide-reaching. Ideal for educated, internet-connected populations.

Example:

A social work NGO sends an online survey link to 1,000 women enrolled in its self-help group programme to assess changes in their financial confidence and group participation over the past year.

- **Postal / Mail Survey:** A printed questionnaire is mailed to respondents who fill it out and mail it back. Low cost, reaches distant areas, but response rates are often low.

Example:

A state government mails questionnaires to all registered persons with disabilities in rural blocks, asking about access to disability pensions and rehabilitation services.

5.2 Researcher-Administered Questionnaire

The researcher (or trained enumerators) administers the questionnaire directly — reading out questions and recording the respondent's answers. This ensures completeness and is essential when respondents cannot read.

- **In-Person (Face-to-Face):** Researcher visits respondents at home or in the community. Highest data quality but expensive and time-consuming.

Example:

A social worker conducting a household survey in a tribal village in Jharkhand visits each family, reads out questions in the local language, and records responses about food security and access to ration cards.

- **Telephone Survey:** Researcher calls respondents and reads out the questionnaire over the phone. Faster and cheaper than in-person, but limited by phone access and cooperation.

Example:

An NGO calls its beneficiaries to conduct a quick 10-question satisfaction survey about the counselling services they received in the past month.

6. Types by Content

Questionnaires can also be classified by the nature of the information they seek to collect.

- **Fact Questionnaires:** Focus on collecting objective, factual, verifiable information — such as age, income, family size, education level, or utilisation of services. These questions have definite, correct answers.

Example:

'What is your monthly household income? (a) Below ₹3,000 (b) ₹3,000–5,000 (c) ₹5,000–10,000 (d) Above ₹10,000'

- **Opinion / Attitude Questionnaires:** Designed to understand beliefs, preferences, perceptions, values, or attitudes. These questions have no 'correct' answer — what matters is what the respondent genuinely thinks or feels.

Example:

'Do you believe that the government is doing enough to protect women from domestic violence?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Cannot say' This measures public opinion for a social policy advocacy study.

7. General Advantages of Questionnaires

Questionnaires offer several key advantages that make them one of the most popular research tools in social work research:

- **Cost-effective:** Questionnaires can be distributed to hundreds or thousands of people at minimal cost, especially when administered online or by post.
- **Time-saving:** Data from a large number of respondents can be collected simultaneously, unlike interviews which must be done one at a time.
- **Wide geographical reach:** With online or postal questionnaires, data can be collected from people in different cities, states, or even countries.
- **Anonymity:** Respondents may provide more honest answers — especially on sensitive topics — when they are not face-to-face with the researcher.
- **Standardisation:** Every respondent answers the same questions, making it easy to compare responses and identify patterns.
- **Quantifiability:** Closed-ended responses can be easily converted into numbers and analysed statistically.
- **Reduced interviewer bias:** Since the researcher is not present, their appearance, tone, or personality cannot influence the respondent's answers.
- **Convenience for respondents:** Self-administered questionnaires can be filled out at the respondent's own pace and time.

Example:

Social Work Application: The National Family Health Survey (NFHS), India's largest demographic and health survey, uses structured questionnaires administered to hundreds of thousands of households across the country. The standardised format allows comparison of health and social indicators across states and over time — something impossible with interviews alone.

8. General Disadvantages of Questionnaires

Despite their many strengths, questionnaires have important limitations that social work researchers must be aware of:

- **Requires literacy:** Respondents must be able to read and write — making self-administered questionnaires unsuitable for illiterate or semi-literate populations, who are often the most important groups in social work research.
- **Low response rate:** Especially in postal and online surveys, many people simply do not return or complete the questionnaire, leading to incomplete or biased samples.
- **No clarification possible:** Unlike in an interview, the respondent cannot ask for clarification if a question is confusing. This can lead to misinterpretation and inaccurate answers.
- **Superficial data:** Closed-ended questions often fail to capture the depth, nuance, and complexity of social experiences — especially suffering, discrimination, or poverty.
- **Cannot verify answers:** The researcher cannot check whether the respondent is telling the truth, whether someone else filled it out, or whether the respondent understood the question correctly.
- **Inflexibility:** The questionnaire cannot adapt to the individual respondent's situation the way an interviewer can.
- **Missing responses:** Respondents may leave some questions blank, especially sensitive or complex ones.
- **Context is lost:** A questionnaire cannot capture body language, emotional state, or the social environment in which the respondent lives — which are often crucial in social work research.

Example:

Social Work Limitation: A researcher studying mental health among elderly persons in rural areas sends a self-administered questionnaire about depression symptoms. Many elderly respondents are illiterate and cannot fill it out. Others who do fill it out may not understand clinical terms like 'persistent low mood' or 'loss of interest.' The researcher gets incomplete and unreliable data. An interview with a trained social worker would have been far more appropriate.

9. Questionnaire vs. Schedule: Key Differences

Questionnaires are often confused with schedules. Both are tools for collecting data using questions, but they differ significantly in how they are used.

Aspect	Questionnaire	Schedule
Who fills it?	Respondent fills it	Researcher fills it
Literacy needed?	Yes (respondent must read)	No (researcher reads aloud)
Researcher present?	Not required	Always required
Used for	Literate, urban, educated groups	Rural, illiterate, tribal groups
Completeness	Some questions may be skipped	Researcher ensures all questions answered
Cost	Lower (no researcher needed)	Higher (requires field visits)
Social Work Use	NGO surveys, online	Village household surveys,

	assessments	census
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10. Quick Summary of All Types

The table below provides a concise reference for all the major types of questionnaires covered in this guide:

Type	Structure	Data	Best Used For
Structured	Closed-ended	Quantitative	Large-scale surveys
Unstructured	Open-ended	Qualitative	Exploratory research
Semi-Structured	Mixed	Both	Balanced research
Pictorial	Visual/Images	Qualitative/Visual	Children, low literacy
Dichotomous	Yes/No only	Quantitative	Quick screening
Multiple-Choice	Select option(s)	Quantitative	Standard surveys
Likert Scale	Rating 1–5	Quantitative	Attitude measurement

11. Conclusion

The questionnaire is one of the most powerful, flexible, and widely used tools in social work research. Whether structured or unstructured, closed or open, administered online or in person — each type of questionnaire serves a specific research purpose and is best suited to specific populations and contexts.

In social work research, the choice of questionnaire type is never arbitrary. It must be guided by the nature of the research question, the characteristics of the population being studied, and the resources available to the researcher. Structured questionnaires work best for large-scale surveys of educated populations. Unstructured and semi-structured questionnaires are more appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of vulnerable and marginalised communities. Pictorial questionnaires are essential when working with children or people with low literacy.

When well-designed, a questionnaire can give voice to thousands of people simultaneously — making visible the invisible problems of poverty, inequality, discrimination, and suffering. That is why it remains an indispensable tool in the hands of a social work researcher committed to evidence-based practice and social justice.