

The Effects of Excluding Instructions from an Agree/ Disagree Survey Item

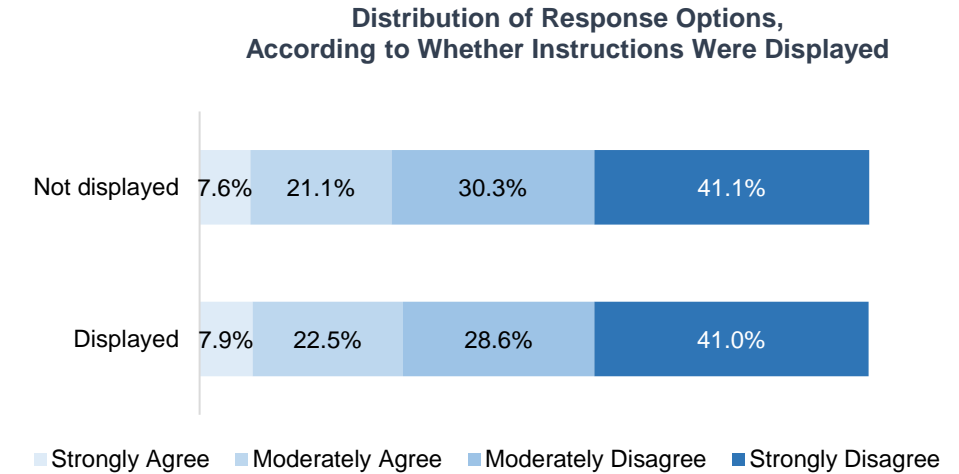
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Instructions are typically displayed with survey items that use bipolar scales of the agree/disagree variety. Here is an example of such an item, with the instructions italicized:

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: As far as making progress on important issues, it does not really matter who won the 2016 presidential election.

- Strongly agree
- Moderately agree
- Moderately disagree
- Strongly disagree

If several agree/disagree items in a questionnaire are grouped together in a single block-type arrangement, the instructions need to be displayed only once (e.g., “How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?”). However, if individual items are separated and each has instructions, the instructions can begin to seem redundant, and some survey designers intentionally exclude them. It is unclear whether the exclusion of



instructions in agree/disagree items affects respondents’ ability to comprehend what is being asked of them (i.e., to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement). This study was intended to determine if people respond differently to agree/disagree items depending on whether the items have instructions.¹

Our findings suggest that instructions make little difference in how people respond to

this type of item. The percentage of people choosing any of the four response options for the above item was found to vary by no more than two points, irrespective of whether instructions were displayed.

In addition, displaying or not displaying the instructions did not appreciably affect overall survey response rates (19.8% vs. 20.0%) or completion rates of respondents (59.3% vs. 57.6%). ■

¹A sample of 58,964 high school students who took the ACT® test in December 2016 was randomly assigned to receive either a questionnaire with instructions for the above item or one without instructions. A total of 11,721 students responded (i.e., answered at least one question), and of these, 6,849 completed the entire questionnaire. The above item was displayed by itself on a separate page of the online questionnaire and was the only agree/disagree item in the questionnaire. Future research could examine the effect of excluding instructions from block-type arrangements of agree/disagree items.