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Designing a Retrospective Post-then-Pre Question

The retrospective post-then-pre design has a few important features: clear instructions, reflective order, and presentation style.

- **Clear instructions** — Provide concise instructions that clearly tell the respondent what to do. Remind the respondent to provide two answers for each question: one assessing **current** knowledge, skill, attitude, behavior, etc. and one assessing **past** knowledge, skill, attitude, behavior. See the example below. If possible, verbal instructions are helpful.
- **Reflective order** — Place the post-program response first. The retrospective post-then-pre question is designed to have the participants use the same frame of reference for both their pre and post-program responses. The base frame of reference should be their post program perceptions. Notice, in the example below, the respondents answer the “Now”, or post program section, first. This makes it the base frame of reference (Howard, 1980).
- **Presentation style** — Design the question in a way that helps the participants understand what they are being asked to do. For example, you can use shading, font styles, question layouts, or other design elements appropriate for your audience. See the examples below for different ways to present your question.

Example 1: Please read the statement in the center section below. On the left, place a checkmark in the box to describe how you communicate with your child now **after** attending this course. In the section on the right, place a checkmark in the box that describes how you communicated with your child **before** taking this course.

After the Course				Before the Course		
Rarely	Some-times	Often		Rarely	Some-times	Often
			1. I try to see things from my child's point of view			
			2. I tell my child when I am upset without blaming or criticizing			

Notice that the format of this question separates the two response sections. The bold type helps the participant recognize the timeframe for each response. (This example comes from Gail Peavey, Polk County, and the Iowa State Extension's Strengthening Families Program.)

Example 2: Please provide two responses for each statement below. In the column labeled “Now, at end of workshop” circle the answer that describes your viewpoint **NOW that we have finished** the workshop. Then, in the shaded section labeled “Before, the workshop” circle the answer that describes your opinion **BEFORE this workshop**.

	NOW, at end of workshop				BEFORE, the workshop			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Our coalition has a strong vision of success	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. We have a plan that will allow us to achieve our goal	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

The shaded column distinguishes the two responses that are requested. The bold type highlights the timeframes for each response.

Another option for Example 1 and 2 is to fold back the paper vertically so that only the NOW section of the question is seen. Then, ask the respondent to open up the page and complete the BEFORE section.

Example 3: Please provide two responses for each statement below. In the line labeled “After the program”, circle one number that describes your shopping habits **now that you have finished** the program. In the section labeled “Before the program” circle the number that described your shopping habits **prior to the program**.

	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1. I buy foods that are healthy for my children				
a) After the program	1	2	3	4
b) Before the program	1	2	3	4

In this example, the post- and pre-program response scales are positioned under the statement to set them apart. Bold and italic type help the participant see the two scales.

Each of the above examples is slightly different. You can select from these ideas to help your participants understand what they are being asked to do and where they should mark their response. Clear instructions, reflective order, and presentation style will help increase the accuracy of results from your post-then-pre questions. Pilot test your question with several similar participants to make sure it is understandable.

Reference

Howard, G.S. (1980). Response-shift bias a problem in evaluating interventions with pre / post self-reports. *Evaluation Review* 4(1), 93-106.