Postal questionnaires

Lesson 7.2.2 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Postal questionnaires can reach participants who are geographically spread out, busy or easier to contact at home than in a lab.

Standardised questions make responses easier to compare, especially when closed questions or rating scales are used.

Low response rates can create sampling bias because the people who reply may differ from those who ignore the questionnaire.

Anonymity can encourage honest answers, but researchers still need clear consent, confidentiality and sensitive wording.

Postal questionnaires are practical for large samples, but researchers cannot easily clarify confusing questions or check who completed the form.

Key terms

Postal questionnaire: A physical questionnaire sent to participants for completion and return by post.

Self-report: Data participants provide about their own thoughts, feelings or behaviour.

Response rate: The percentage of contacted people who return usable responses.

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Continued

Sampling bias: A distortion caused when the responding sample differs from the target population.

Closed question: A question with fixed answer options.

Open question: A question that lets participants answer in their own words.

Anonymity: When participants' identities are not attached to their responses.

Missing data: Information not provided because items are skipped or forms are incomplete.

Further detail and evidence

A postal questionnaire is sent as a physical document for completion and return by post. It differs from an online questionnaire even though both can be completed remotely. Provide a return route, clear instructions, accessible print and an appropriate response deadline.

Sampling needs a suitable address frame and a plan for nonresponse. A stamped return envelope and proportionate reminder can improve return, while confidentiality procedures protect identifiable information. Only contact people in ways covered by consent and privacy arrangements.

Use clear, neutral items with time periods and response anchors. Include open/closed questions as needed and state scoring. A pilot checks comprehension, burden and instructions; it is not merely a smaller final sample added to the main results.

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Applying the ideas

An employer could send an anonymous satisfaction questionnaire with an independent return address, reducing direct manager pressure. A code can permit follow-up but means responses are not fully anonymous if linked to identity; explain that distinction accurately.

Worked example: A health psychologist posts 600 questionnaires about sleep habits to shift workers and receives 150 usable replies. What should be said about the method and response rate? The method is a postal questionnaire because workers complete the questions remotely and return them. The response rate is 25 percent because 150 out of 600 replied. This may be practical for reaching shift workers, but the low response rate could create sampling bias if the workers who replied differ from those who did not, such as being more concerned about sleep.

Worked example: In a postal questionnaire about workplace stress, several participants skip sensitive items about conflict with managers. How should the researcher treat this problem? The skipped answers are missing data, and the researcher should not invent responses or pressure participants to answer sensitive items. They should report how much data is missing and consider whether the missing answers affect conclusions. Better anonymity, clearer consent and careful wording might reduce skipped items in a future questionnaire.

Evaluation and connections

Postal completion can reach people without internet access and reduce interviewer influence. Literacy, cost, delay, lost post, low returns and uncertainty about who answered threaten usefulness. Nonresponders may differ systematically. Confidentiality may encourage honesty without removing recall or social desirability bias.