EVALUATION QUESTIONS CHECKLIST for Program Evaluation

Lori Wingate, The Evaluation Center | Daniela Schroeter, School of Public Affairs and Administration
Western Michigan University | 2016

Evaluation questions identify what aspects of a program[1] will be investigated. They focus on the merit, worth, or significance[2] of a program or particular aspects of a program. Unlike survey questions, they are *not* intended to derive single data points. Evaluation questions help to define the boundaries of an evaluation that are consistent with evaluation users' information needs, opportunities and constraints related to data collection, and available resources.

The purpose of this checklist is to aid in developing effective and appropriate evaluation questions and in assessing the quality of existing questions. It identifies characteristics of good evaluation questions, based on the relevant literature and our own experience with evaluation design, implementation, and use.

Evaluation questions SHOULD be...	Evaluation questions SHOULD NOT be...
☐ **EVALUATIVE**	**NON-EVALUATIVE**
Evaluative questions call for an appraisal of a program or aspects of it based on the factual and descriptive information gathered about it. Questions should be framed so they will yield answers that	Non-evaluative questions call only for factual information or discrete data points that do not readily translate into determinations of program merit, worth, or significance. Answers to these types of questions have limited potential to influence decisions, because they do not provide a frame of reference in relation to merit, worth, or significance.
• provide determinations of merit, worth, or significance, or enable evaluation users to readily reach such determinations on their own.	
• directly inform decisions about the program (e.g., how to improve or modify it; whether to continue, discontinue, expand, or reconfigure it).	
☐ **PERTINENT**	**PERIPHERAL**
Pertinent questions are clearly related to the program's substance and evaluation users' information needs. Questions should be directly relevant to	Peripheral questions are about minor, irrelevant, or superficial aspects of the program or stakeholder interests.
• the program's design, purpose, activities, or outcomes.	
• the purpose of the evaluation.	
• what evaluation users need to find out from the evaluation.	
☐ **REASONABLE**	**UNREASONABLE**
Reasonable questions are linked to what a program can practically and realistically achieve or influence. Questions should be suitable with regard to the program's	Unreasonable questions are about things the program cannot realistically influence given its resources and the nature of the intervention.
• scope (reasonable limits of what or whom the program can influence).	
• maturity (the program's stage of development, such as whether it is just starting, fully developed and implemented, or preparing for closure).	
• resources (monetary and nonmonetary resources needed to implement and produce outcomes).	

Evaluation questions SHOULD be…	Evaluation questions SHOULD NOT be…
☐ **SPECIFIC** Specific questions clearly identify what will be investigated in the evaluation. Questions should point to the following: · program components[3] that will be examined for the evaluation. · dimensions[4] of program performance that will be examined for the evaluation. · those affected by the components or dimensions under investigation.	**VAGUE** Vague questions are stated in overly broad terms, so it is not clear what aspects of a program need to be investigated in order to answer the questions.
☐ **ANSWERABLE** Answerable questions reflect the real-world constraints on the type and quantity of data that can feasibly be collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Questions should be answerable based on · data that can be accessed for the evaluation, with due consideration of privacy, ethics, politics, geography, and other issues. · resources available to collect, analyze, and interpret data, including time, personnel, technology, and funding.	**UNANSWERABLE** Unanswerable questions cannot be resolved in a definitive way, because it is not feasible to collect enough data of sufficient quality to answer the question in a defensible way.

When multiple questions are necessary to fulfill an evaluation's purpose and meet evaluation users' information needs:

Evaluation question *sets* SHOULD be …	Evaluation question *sets* SHOULD NOT be …
☐ **COMPLETE** A set of evaluation questions is complete when the questions thoroughly address the purpose of the evaluation and evaluation users' information needs. The question set should be purposefully selected from a broad range of possible topics (e.g., program design, context, process, implementation, products, outputs, outcomes, impacts, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, etc.). A set of evaluation questions does not need to address all of these topics, but there should be a sound rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of potential topics.	**INCOMPLETE** A set of evaluation questions is incomplete when important topics are omitted without a sound rationale that is consistent with the purpose of the evaluation and evaluation users' information needs.

[1] A *program* is an "orchestrated initiative that dedicates resources and inputs to a series of activities intended to achieve specific process, product, services, output, and outcome goals" (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011, p. 291).

[2] *Merit* is "the excellence of an object as assessed by its intrinsic qualities or performance" (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011, p. 289). *Worth* is "the value of an object in relationship to needs or identified purposes" (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011, p. 293). *Significance* is "potential influence, importance, and visibility" (Stufflebeam & Coryn, p. 13).

[3] A program *component* is a distinct part of a program that is "experienced separately by consumers" (Davidson, 2005, p. 103). Together, these "physically or temporally discrete parts" make up the overall program (Scriven, 1991).

[4] *Dimensions* of program performance are the criteria for determining program quality, such as (a) how the program is experienced by consumers (e.g., relevance, satisfaction of needs); (b) types of changes due to the program (e.g., specific outcomes and impacts related to changes among individuals, groups, or communities), or (c) cross-cutting aspects such as cost-effectiveness, goal achievement, or innovation.

References

Davidson, E. J. (2005). *Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scriven, M. (1991). *Evaluation thesaurus.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stufflebeam, D. L., & Coryn. C. L. S. (2014). *Evaluation theory, models, and applications* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K., & Caruthers, F. A. (2011). *The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

Continued Reading

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Asthma Control Program. (2013). *Good evaluation questions: A checklist to help focus your evaluation*. Available from http://bit.ly/eq-cdc

This checklist by evaluators from the CDC's National Asthma Control Program offers another perspective on the qualities of good evaluation questions, with an emphasis on the importance of involving stakeholders in developing questions.

Patton, M. Q. (2012). *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 205-208.

In Chapter 8 ("Checking that Fundamental Areas for Evaluation Inquiry are Being Adequately Addressed"), Michael Quinn Patton offers guidance on how evaluators can facilitate discussions with evaluation users to clarify program goals and focus evaluation questions on outcomes and results. He illuminates the important difference between framing questions around goals versus outcomes.

Preskill, H., & Jones, N. (2009). A practical guide for engaging stakeholders in developing evaluation questions. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Available from http://bit.ly/eq-rwjf

Hallie Preskill and Nathalie Jones offer step-by-step guidance on how to engage stakeholders in developing evaluation questions, with worksheets to facilitate decisions about whom to involve and how.

Robinson, S. (2014, January). Ask a brilliant question, get an elegant answer? [blog] Available from http://bit.ly/eq-srob

In this blog post, Sheila Robinson discusses the nature and function of evaluation questions and provides suggestions for writing good questions.

Rogers, P. (2013). *Linking evaluation questions to strategies and approaches* [video]. USAID Evaluation Interest Group. Available from http://bit.ly/eq-rogers

In this four-minute video, Patricia Rogers makes the point that asking good questions is critical for evaluation utility and efficiency.

Rossi, P. H., Lipsey, M. W., & Freeman, H. E. (2004). *Evaluation: A systematic approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Peter Rossi and his coauthors argue, that "a carefully developed set of evaluation questions gives structure to the evaluation, leads to appropriate and thoughtful planning, and serves as a basis for essential discussions about who is interested in the answers and how they will be used" (p. 53). Their book includes an entire chapter (Chapter 3: "Identifying Issues and Formulating Questions") on the topic of evaluation questions, with suggestions about how to focus questions, address the needs and concerns of stakeholders, and prioritize questions.

USAID. (no date). *Good evaluation questions: A checklist to help focus your evaluation.* Available from http://bit.ly/eq-usaid

With the premise that the evaluation question development process should be iterative and collaborative, this checklist provides guidance for identifying, prioritizing, and writing evaluation questions.