

The Semantic Differential

The semantic differential technique of Osgood et al. (1957) asks a person to rate an issue or topic on a standard set of **bipolar adjectives** (i.e. with opposite meanings descriptive words), each representing a **seven point scale**. This is a **direct method** of attitude measurement and produces **quantitative data**.

Complete the semantic differential scales below to measure your attitude to any word, e.g. homework, America, music, college, chocolate, beer, sleep, pornography, psychology etc.

| Evaluation - | +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 +6 +7 | Evaluation + |
|--------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Bad | - - - - - | Good |
| Cruel | - - - - - | Kind |
| Ugly | - - - - - | Beautiful |
| Sad | - - - - - | Happy |
| Negative | - - - - - | Positive |
| Unpleasant | - - - - - | Pleasant |
| Worthless | - - - - - | Valuable |

| Potency - | +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 +6 +7 | Potency + |
|------------|----------------------|-----------|
| Weak | - - - - - | Strong |
| Small | - - - - - | Large |
| Soft | - - - - - | Hard |
| Light | - - - - - | Heavy |
| Shallow | - - - - - | Deep |
| Submissive | - - - - - | Assertive |
| Simple | - - - - - | Complex |

| Activity - | +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 +6 +7 | Activity + |
|------------|----------------------|------------|
| Passive | - - - - - | Active |
| Relaxed | - - - - - | Tense |
| Slow | - - - - - | Fast |
| Cold | - - - - - | Hot |
| Quiet | - - - - - | Noisy |
| Dim | - - - - - | Bright |
| Rounded | - - - - - | Angular |

Semantic differential is widely used in advertising and marketing research, from questionnaires to interviews and focus groups. The versatility of uses with the bipolar adjectives and the simplicity of understanding them have made it ideal for consumer questionnaires and interviews.

Attitude Measurement

| Evaluation - | +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 +6 +7 | Evaluation + |
|--------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Bad | -- -- -- -- -- | Good |
| Cruel | -- -- -- -- -- | Kind |
| Ugly | -- -- -- -- -- | Beautiful |
| Sad | -- -- -- -- -- | Happy |
| Negative | -- -- -- -- -- | Positive |
| Unpleasant | -- -- -- -- -- | Pleasant |
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| Light | -- -- -- -- -- | Heavy |
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| Activity - | +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 +6 +7 | Activity + |
|------------|----------------------|------------|
| Passive | -- -- -- -- -- | Active |
| Relaxed | -- -- -- -- -- | Tense |
| Slow | -- -- -- -- -- | Fast |
| Cold | -- -- -- -- -- | Hot |
| Quiet | -- -- -- -- -- | Noisy |
| Dim | -- -- -- -- -- | Bright |
| Rounded | -- -- -- -- -- | Angular |

The semantic differential technique reveals information on three basic dimensions of attitudes: evaluation, potency (i.e. strength) and activity.

- **Evaluation** is concerned with whether a person thinks positively or negatively about the attitude topic (e.g. dirty – clean, and ugly - beautiful).
- **Potency** is concerned with how powerful the topic is for the person (e.g. cruel – kind, and strong - weak).
- **Activity** is concerned with whether the topic is seen as active or passive (e.g. active – passive).

Using this information we can see if a persons feeling (evaluation) towards an object is consistent with their behaviour. For example, a place might like the taste of chocolate (evaluative) but not eat it often (activity).