1 Introduction

Recoding may be needed in a number of different situations:

- To categorise a continuous variable. For example, you may have measured people’s BMI (body mass index) as a continuous variable but may want to use it to create groups such as underweight, normal, overweight, obese.

- You may have a categorical variable but want to combine some of the categories — for example, if you’ve ended up with categories with very few observations in them.

- To reverse the coding for a particular variable. For example, the response to a particular question may have been measured on a 5-point scale and you might want to reverse the coding so that 1 becomes 5, and so on.

2 Categorising a continuous variable

1. Choose Transform, Recode, Into Different Variables.
2. Put the variable you want to recode in the Input Variable → Output Variable box. In the Output Variable box, type in a name for the new (grouped) variable. For example, if you are grouping BMI you might use the name ‘BMIgroup’. Click on Change.
3. Click on Old and New Values.
4. To define the first group, under Old Value click on Range, LOWEST through value: and, in the box below this, type in the upper limit for that group. For example, using the BMI example the lowest group (underweight) is a BMI below 18.5, so you would type 18.4 (or 18.49) into this box (this will depend on how many decimal places you have recorded BMI to). Now, under New Value select Value and type in the code for this group (i.e. 1 for the first group). Now click on Add.
5. To define the middle group(s), under Old Value click on Range: and, in the two boxes, type in the lower and upper limit for that group (e.g. 18.5 and 24.99 for ‘normal’ BMI). Define the code for this group as above and click on Add. Repeat for all groups apart from the last.
6. To define the last group, under Old Value click on Range, value through HIGHEST: and, in the box below this, type in the lower limit for this last group. For example, using the BMI example the last group (obese) is a BMI of 30 or higher, so you would type 30 into this box. Define the code for this group in the usual way and click on Add.
7. Finally click on Continue then OK.
3 Combining groups

This is done in a similar way to that described above. For example you might have eight age groups, coded from 1 to 8, and want to change them such that groups 1 and 2 were combined, 3 and 4 were combined, 5 remained as an group on its own and groups 6 to 8 were combined. You would do this as follows:

1. Follow steps 1 to 3 as above.
2. Use step 5 described above to combine groups. (in our example Range 1 through 2 would become new value 1, 3 through 4 would become new value 2, and 6 through 8 would become new value 4.
3. To simply recode one group (e.g. here we would want group 5 to become group 3), under Old Value select Value and the old code. Under New Value select Value and type in the corresponding new code. Click on Add. Repeat this above for all the single codes you want to change.
4. If there are any values you want kept the same (this would not apply in our example), then you need to specify this: under Old Value select All other values and under New Value select Copy old value(s). Click on Add.
5. Click on Continue then OK.

4 Recoding a categorical or ordinal variable

Again, this is done in a similar way to that described above:

1. Follow steps 1 to 3 as previously.
2. Under Old Value select Value and enter one of the old codes. Under New Value select Value and type in the corresponding new code. Click on Add.
3. Repeat the above for all the codes you want to change.
4. If there are any values you want kept the same follow step 4 above.
5. Click on Continue then OK.

NOTE
Once you have done any recoding / regrouping you may want to switch to variable view to (a) change your new variable so that it has no decimal places and (b) add value labels (e.g. so that 'Underweight, Normal, Overweight, and Obese’ appear in tables and charts rather than the codes 1,2,3 and 4). See SPSS Handout 2 for how to add value labels.