

Tips for Writing Good Survey Questions

1. Speak Their Language:

Keeping language simple and direct in general is very important. Talk to people on their level. Avoid grammatical messiness like double negatives and off-putting vocabulary like industry jargon or overly technical concepts. If you are going to reference a concept that your respondents may be unfamiliar with, don't just gloss over it. Remember, these people are interrupting their busy days to do your survey and they've got a lot on their minds. For example, take the question:

How likely would you be to enroll in CookieDirect?

This question could be made better by simply providing a few extra details. For example:

CookieDirect is a baked goods delivery service that sends a new type of fresh baked cookies straight to your door every Monday night at 7pm. How likely would you be to enroll in CookieDirect?

If you don't explain what you're talking about, you risk respondents getting frustrated and quitting your survey, or, even worse answering the question randomly. The former will raise the cost of getting your data, and the latter will lower your data quality.

2. Keep it Simple:

Always ask about just one idea at a time. If you ask about multiple ideas in the same question it makes it hard for your respondents to answer and impossible for you to interpret their answers. For example, take the question:

How organized and interesting was the speaker?

If a respondent answers "moderately" to this question, what does that mean? Moderately organized AND moderately interesting? Extremely interesting but only slightly organized? Or vice versa. This confusion on how to interpret the answer becomes a real problem when you want to give feedback to your speaker. Do you tell her to be more organized or more interesting next time? End all of this confusion simply by writing two questions instead of one. For example:

How organized was the speaker?

How interesting was the speaker?

Now you have separate ratings for each idea—this makes providing feedback quicker and easier for your respondents, and it makes that feedback easier for the speaker to respond to. A win-win scenario.

3. Balance Not Bias:

Writing survey questions that bias respondents toward one answer violates a survey's objectivity and biases the answers you get to your questions. For example:

We think our customer service representatives are really awesome. How awesome do you think our customer service representatives are?

This question will likely pressure your respondents into answering more favorably than they actually feel about the customer service representatives. How do you fix it?

To write a more effective question, try to focus on more specific qualities ("awesomeness" is a pretty vague generalization), it will dilute the power of sweeping generalizations. For example:

How helpful do you think our customer service representatives are?

Even with this change, however, the question is still slightly biased toward positive responses. It's best if you can avoid inserting your own opinions into the question altogether, as these opinions will bias the answers. This, however, is not always possible. In that case, try to keep the survey balanced as a whole. Frame some of your survey questions in a positive way and some in a negative way. For example:

On average, how helpful are our customer service representatives?

On average, how frustrated do you get when speaking to our customer service representatives?

Keeping the tone of your survey balanced and even-handed will ensure that you get people's "true" attitudes instead of what they think you want to hear. This will help you make the right decisions, and alert you when you have a problem.

The Nuts and Bolts of Survey Construction

There are a lot of choices to make when you're writing a survey, but following some basic rules can help you make the right choices every time. Here are great tips for creating a survey that gets you the answers you need.

1. Use formatting. Group similar questions to keep your survey logical and focused. Be sure that a single question is not split up on the bottom of the first page. If the whole question doesn't fit, start it on the next page.

- 2. Be focused.** Write your survey questions with your research question in mind. If the survey question doesn't help you answer the research question, it has no place in your survey.
- 3. Be brief.** Keep questions and surveys as short as possible to keep respondents interested and motivated to complete your survey. You should have a minimum of 15 questions (for groups of 2 or 3) and a maximum of 20 questions (for a group of 4).
- 4. Ease into it.** Asking personal or sensitive questions at the beginning can scare people away. Save those questions—if they're truly necessary—for the end.
- 5. Stick to specifics.** Create survey questions that explore one idea at a time to make sure your respondents can understand what you're asking. Vague, general, multi-part questions can be confusing and tough to answer.
- 6. Clarify, clarify, clarify.** Spell out everything that could be interpreted in more than one way. Want to know if someone is conservative in your political survey? Make sure you specify whether you're talking about the way they dress, their politics, their preference in music or cuisine or their approach to life (as just a few examples!).
- 7. Avoid yes/no questions.** Yes/no questions don't capture people who are on the fence or nuances of people's opinions – in other words, yes/no questions can't give you the information you need!
- 8. Use words, not numbers.** When designing answer choices, use phrases such as "slightly likely" or "extremely likely," not numbers like "2" or "4" to indicate degree of preference. These answer choices are easier for people to understand.

Survey Question Formats

There are several ways to ask questions. For the purposes of this assignment, I would like you to avoid asking for written answers as it will be very difficult to create data at the end. Use the following examples as a guide:

1. Multiple Choice

This question type allows the survey taker to select one or more options from a list of answers that you define. You should use multiple choice questions when you have a fixed number of options. You can either instruct them to choose the most applicable option only (as in the case below), or to choose "all that apply".

Which of the following options represents your lunchtime eating habits most regularly? Check one answer only:

_____ I bring a bagged lunch to school.

_____ I buy lunch from the school cafeteria.

_____ I go home for lunch.

_____ I buy lunch at a nearby restaurant.

_____ I eat lunch at a friend's or family's house.

_____ I rarely eat lunch during lunch hour.

2. Rating Scales (Likert Scale)

With rating scale questions, the survey taker selects a single rating for your question along an equally spaced continuum of possible choices. A Likert scale measures attitudes and behaviours using answer choices that range from one extreme to another.

How likely are you to use your phone during Period 1 for non-educational purposes? Put an "x" on the line that reflects your response most accurately.

Not at all likely

somewhat likely

extremely likely

3. Dichotomous Question

This is generally considered a "closed question" type because it forces a yes/no answer. This should only be used if you are absolutely sure that the person couldn't possibly have another response.

Do you currently have any biological grandparents living in your home on a permanent basis?

yes

no

Remember that you can use different styles of question in a single survey. Choose the format that best suits the question.

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