

Purpose

It is easy to write a survey, but not so easy to write a good survey.

These simple tips can help you get more accurate and meaningful answers.

Key Points

- Use plain language and keep questions short
- Only ask one question at a time
- Make sure the answers to choose from include all of the most likely answers and that only one answer can apply
- When asking people to think back in time, keep the time frames short
- Avoid leading questions
- Give people permission to give answers that may not be as socially acceptable
- Put difficult questions in the middle
- Format the survey so it is easy to read and answer
- Pilot test your survey before you use it

What makes for a good survey?

When writing a survey, you need to keep a number of principles in mind:

- It is easy to write a survey. It is not so easy to write a good survey.
- The cognitive (thought) process people go through when answering even simple survey questions is complex.
- Surveys are good for documenting “what?” questions. They are not so good for understanding “how?” or “why?”
- Surveys are good for gathering information from a lot of people very quickly. However, they are not usually good for gathering rich, deep information.

How can I write a better survey?

There are a number of strategies you can use to help manage the complex cognitive process of responding to survey questions.

- Use **plain language**. Avoid technical language and jargon.
- Keep questions **short**.
- Make sure your questions are asking only **one thing at a time**. Any time you see the word “and” in a question, you need to check that you are not asking about two things at once.
 - ⇒ For example, if you ask, “Do you think there is too much violence in music and movies?”, what is the person supposed to do who thinks there is too much sex in movies but not in music?

These should be two separate questions.

- Make sure the answers you give people to choose from are **mutually exclusive**. That is, unless you specifically want them to “check all that apply”, make sure only one answer can be chosen.
 - ⇒ For example, you might ask teachers “How would you rate your school’s efforts to address sexual harassment between students?” If the answers you give them to choose from are “No Effort / Little Effort / Sufficient Effort / Much Effort”, then you have a problem. It’s possible that there is “little” effort but the person sees that as being “sufficient”.
 - ⇒ Make sure there is **no overlap** in the response categories. For example, if you are asking about age and want them to choose from categories, make sure each answer only appears in one category. If the answers you give them to choose from are “less than 18 years / 18—25 years / 25 years—35 years / 35 years or older”, then people who are exactly 25 and exactly 35 have two different answers they could choose from. Change those categories to “less than 18 years / 18—24 years / 25—34 years / 35 years or older”.
- Make sure the answers you give people to choose from are **exhaustive**. All possible answers need to be represented. If a respondent’s answer isn’t in the list they have to choose from, they will skip the question or mark the one that is close but not fully accurate.
- If you are asking people to recall behaviors or experiences and precision matters, restrict your question to a **narrow time period**. Start with the **most recent** experiences and work your way backward. If possible, give a **temporal cue**.
 - ⇒ For example, if you are surveying teachers in October about how many times they have taught a lesson that considered gender stereotypes: “How many times since Labor Day have you taught a lesson in which students had to identify gender stereotypes?”
- Break down the behavior or experience into **multiple questions**.
 - ⇒ For example, in a survey about life satisfaction you would not rely on a single question about how satisfied people are with their relationships. Instead, you would break it down into areas such as: “How satisfied are you with your relationships with family?” “How satisfied are you with your relationships with friends?” “How satisfied are you with your relationships with teachers?”
- **Avoid loaded questions** such as those that begin “Do you agree that...” This implies that the person should agree. Also avoid emotional appeals in your questions.
 - ⇒ For example, don’t ask, “Do you agree that the age of consent should be raised?” Instead ask, “Should the age of consent be raised?”
- If you are asking about controversial issues, frame the question so that you **give permission** to give the socially undesirable answer.

- ⇒ For example, when asking about lying you might ask “How often have you lied to a teacher?” or “Under what circumstances do you approve of lying to a teacher?” Both of these questions indicate that you already know that students do lie to teachers so it’s okay to admit to it.
- Put threatening or controversial questions in the **middle** of less threatening or controversial questions.
- Formatting matters. Make sure your survey looks pleasing and inviting to complete.
 - ⇒ Leave white space.
 - ⇒ Use simple, clean graphic design.
 - ⇒ Line your questions up on the left side of the page and the answers to choose from or the space to write the answer on the right side of the page.
 - ⇒ Include short, clear instructions.
 - ⇒ Number questions or use shading so people are less likely to miss questions.
 - ⇒ If questions do not apply based on a previous answer, include skip instructions so that you are not asking people to answer irrelevant questions.
 - ⇒ Number pages and include an arrow at the bottom if they need to turn the page.
 - ⇒ Include a thank-you at the end.
- **Pilot test your survey** with a few people. Don’t only have them take the survey. Also ask them to explain how they arrived at their answers. This type of think-aloud technique will help you see if they are understanding the questions and answers in the way you intended, where there are ambiguities in the questions or answers, where they may struggle to fit their answers with the answers you have given them to choose from, where you are inadvertently biasing the answers, etc.