**Guide to Writing Survey Questions**

Extracts from : <http://www.mad.state.mn.us/survey-guide>

**Don't forget clear instructions and explanations**

Always provide a good explanation of why you are conducting the survey and how the information will be used, either at the top of the survey, in a cover letter or e-mail invitation, or both. Make your instructions short and to the point. Let respondents know why it is important that they complete the survey and thank them for their cooperation. Be friendly in your appeal.

**First, think about:**

* What information is necessary? What do you "need to know".
* How much detail will they want?
* How much time is available to analyze the results?
* How will you distribute the survey?

**Design in relation to analysis**

Options for question formatting:

* Scales should be balanced;
* There should be an equal number of "good" and "bad" options.
* Avoid open-ended questions if you cannot clearly identify their usefulness (that is, what you will do with the information you collect)  
  scale of 4 force the respondents to show preference as there is no neutral choice as there is a scale of 5.
* Open-ended questions take longer to answer and analyze, but they usually provide richer information. Scales should be meaningful. For example, don't ask respondents to differentiate between small increments of time (for example, 1-2 minutes or 2-3 minutes).
* You can make safer generalizations from closed-ended data. Have a coding system developed before the survey goes out.

**Question construction**

* Avoid abbreviations and jargon. If they must be used, clearly define them.
* Ask yourself whether several questions are actually necessary or if you can get the information in one question.
* Make your questions easy to understand.
* If a list of answers is provided, make sure all possible answers are present. Even with "yes" and "no" questions, it may be necessary to include a neutral "undecided" or "don't know."
* Start a sequence with the question that is most comfortable to answer.

**Do not use these words in your questions**

Sometimes it takes just one word to bias a question. Avoid using inflammatory words in surveys, such as:  
  
*allege, allude, arbitrary, blame, claim, demand, error, failure, fault, ignore, ill-advised, ill-informed, incompetence, ineptness, insist, just, maintain, misinformed, must, neglected, one-sided, only, overreact, peremptory, purport, questionable, rejection, rigid, so-called, unfortunately, unilateral, unreasonable*  
  
Don't distill complex issues into "black" or "white" scenarios. Rather, explore the "gray" areas.  
  
Try to end with an uplifting question, perhaps an open-ended question asking for their view (but only if you will use the data they provide).

**Check that your questions**

After you have designed your questions, take another look:

* Is the question relevant? Is it consistent with survey goals?
* Does the question lead to a particular response? (Is it a leading question?) 🡪 make it neutral
* Does the question use negative phrases or words? 🡪 remove
* If a scale is used for responses, is it balanced (for example, 1 to 5, with 3 being neutral)?
* Is the question wordy? 🡪 make it shorter and to the point
* Were ambiguous words used - words with more than one meaning? 🡪 replace them with clearer words
* Is the question worded simply?
* Does each question ask for one piece of information? 🡪 divide it into several question, each asking for one piece of information.
* If responses are provided, are they mutually exclusive? .🡪 make sure the options don’t overlap.

**An ounce of prevention . . .**

Always have someone else look at your work. Even a small pre-test can help. The best option is to let part of your sample population take the survey. If nothing else, show it to a couple of people and get their input. Proofread a second time.

Increasing response rates

There's more to a good survey than the phrasing of its questions. To maximize response rates, consider the following:

* Make the survey brief (no more than 15 minutes to complete).
* Assure anonymity if you can.
* Describe how the survey results will directly affect them (improving services they will receive, etc.).

Surveys allow you to collect information in a consistent manner from a large number of people, but are limited in terms of collecting in-depth data or information that requires follow-up.

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