

Developing a Well-Organized Survey



Main Points for Developing a Well-Organized Survey

- Develop your survey with a clear purpose in mind and keep it short. The quality of your data will go down the longer your survey is.
- Don't show people unnecessary questions. Use qualifying questions to filter out other questions or branch off where applicable.
- Consider putting your more important questions earlier and less burdensome questions (like demographics and objective facts) towards the end of the survey.
- Consider putting more sensitive topics towards the end of the survey.
- Keep similar topics together.
- Consider question and answer randomization and reverse scoring for decreasing the impact of human biases in survey taking.

Beyond carefully developing individual questions, it is also important to pay attention to the overall structure and organization of your survey.

Survey Fatigue: First, the longer your survey, the more likely it is that your participants will become fatigued and started answering less carefully or less completely.

Because of this, it can be beneficial to put more important questions earlier in the survey. You can also put questions that require less thought (demographic questions and objective questions like “How many classes are you taking this semester?” or “What clubs do you participate in?”) towards the end of the survey and questions that require more intensive thinking towards the beginning.

Related, try not to show respondents questions that are not relevant to their experiences. Use screener questions to filter out unnecessary or irrelevant questions

(for example, if someone doesn't have a meal plan and only uses the dining hall sporadically, many questions would not be applicable to their experiences).

Sensitive Topics: Also consider putting more sensitive questions (for example, asking about food insecurity, bullying, mental health) towards the end of the survey. It can be stressful for respondents to be asked personal questions immediately, before they've gotten a chance to get accustomed to the survey. This also ensure that even if respondents decide to discontinue survey rather than answer a sensitive question, they have still shared some of their experiences.

Question Order: Finally, consider whether the order of your questions makes sense or if it will impact participant responses. Keep similar topics together, rather than jumping back and forth (for example, ask all questions about dining hall options in one area of the survey).

You should also consider whether earlier questions can provide hints or context that may impact how respondents will answer later questions. For example, asking about interest in a certain intervention, like extended dining hours, first before assessing their satisfaction may prime respondents to report less favorable attitudes than they normally would.

Randomization and Reverse Scoring: If you are concerned about the order of your questions impacting respondent answers, consider using question and answer randomization. **Question randomization** can mix up the order of a subset of questions to lessen the impact of order on the sample's responses.

Answer randomization can mix up the order or answers to closed questions. **Primacy and recency biases** mean that humans tend to remember and prefer the first options and the last options more so than options in the middle. Randomizing answers can help guard against the impact of these biases, although randomizing answers is *not* recommended when you have ordinal answers (strongly agree to strongly disagree, a sequence of numbers, etc.), as it can lead to confusion and make it harder for respondents to identify their answer.

You can also use **reverse scoring** of some questions. Reverse scoring means rewriting the question to be answered in the opposite direction of questions on the same topic.

The sample questions to the right demonstrate how the sample answer options can be used to measure opposing thoughts. This can be a good option for keeping respondents “on their toes” and identifying or lessening the impact of respondents who provide low effort answers by selecting the same response for every question.



Reverse Coding Example

Forward Coded: How often are you satisfied with the shuttle’s reliability? (Options: Always, Often, Sometimes, Occasionally, Never)

Reverse Coded: How often do you find yourself wishing the campus shuttle were more reliable? (Options: Always, Often, Sometimes, Occasionally, Never)