

Survey Writing Best Practices



Question Writing Best Practices

- Don't reinvent the wheel. See if there are existing items and scales that get at what you want to know from your respondents.
- Prioritize being concise and clear in your questions. Don't feel like you have to hide the purpose of your questions from your respondents. Ensure each question you ask is necessary and has a purpose.
- Give your respondents clear instructions and provide additional information and definitions where needed.
- Use language appropriate for your population of interest and avoid acronyms, jargon, or culturally specific words and phrases that would be unfamiliar or confusing to your population.
- Avoid double-barreled questions, double negatives, biased language, and other practices that can impact your data quality (see chart below).
- When asking for frequencies of certain behaviors, make sure to provide reference frames for times (for example, the semester, in a given week, throughout the academic year).
- Make sure responses that are supposed to be ordinal (have an order of frequency or intensity) are unambiguously ordinal (understand “a lot” of friends compared to “many” friends may differ depending on the person).

Writing and Adapting New Survey Questions

While it can be beneficial to draw on past surveys for existing questions, sometimes we do have to write our own questions from scratch. Even when developing a new question, we can still look to existing survey items for inspiration and to guide us. For example, you can look to past surveys for potential response options and to see examples of wording you can adapt for your own purposes.



When writing a survey question, keep three goals in mind!

The question should...

1. Measure the underlying concept we're interested in
2. Not measure other related concepts
3. Be worded in a way where most respondents will understand it the same way.

It can be hard to achieve all of these goals perfectly. Humans all think and understand things differently, and even the most carefully written survey question can be misunderstood. Survey responses can be impacted by the wording or questions and answers, the number of options, how questions and options are presented, and qualities of the survey itself, like length. Because it is impossible to create a survey that is completely free of the potential for **measurement error**, carefully crafting our survey questions with the above goals in mind is crucial.



Measurement error is the difference between how we measure a variable and its true value in the real world.

Things to Avoid in Your Survey Questions

There are certain practices in writing survey questions that you want to make sure to avoid, because they can create excess stress, confusion, and ambiguity that can impact the quality of your data.

Problem	Description	Example	Alternatives and Solutions
Double-barreled questions	A question that is actually asking two questions in one. This can make it hard for respondents to answer and make data analysis difficult.	"Have you ever had leftover swipes at the dining hall or offered to donate your swipes to another student?"	Ask as two separate questions or turn into a larger "select-many" question.

<p>Double negatives</p>	<p>A question that uses two negative qualifiers. This can be confusing and lead to inaccurate responses.</p>	<p>“Do you oppose Clark not extending dining hours to offer late-night dining?”</p>	<p>Focus on asking the question concisely. If you are using a double negative, you can likely instead ask the question affirmatively. Example: “Do you support extending dining hours to offer late-night dining?”</p>
<p>Biased, slanted, or emotionally evocative language</p>	<p>A question with wording that is not “neutral” or could evoke emotional reactions from respondents that may sway their responses or impact data quality.</p>	<p>“How often have you gone hungry or starved during the semester?”</p>	<p>Use neutral language to allow respondents to consider their own perspective on the issue. “Do you generally feel like you have access to enough food through your meal plan?”</p>
<p>Leading questions</p>	<p>A question that includes language that hints or may pressure participants to respond a certain way. This can influence respondent answers and make them believe there is a “right” answer.</p>	<p>“How poorly of a job do you think Clark is doing at providing good dining options for vegan students?”</p>	<p>Ask in a way that frames any feeling on the issue as a valid and acceptable response. “How would you describe the availability of vegan options at Clark?”</p>
<p>Absolute language</p>	<p>A question that includes words like “always”, “every day”, or “all”. These can be hard to evaluate and are not necessarily useful for understanding trends of behaviors.</p>	<p>“Do you always eat all the food you take from the dining hall?”</p>	<p>Keep absolutes out of the question, but provide an answer option for more absolute answers. “When you take food from the dining hall, how much do you tend to eat?” Options: All, most, half, some, none.</p>

Writing Closed Questions (Questions with pre-selected answer options)

It is likely that your survey will use closed questions. These are questions where you provide answer options for your respondents. Two commonly used types of closed questions are **forced choice** and **select-all**.

Forced Choice	Select-Multiple
Only allows respondents to select one answer	Allows respondents to select multiple responses or select-all-that-apply.
Typically uses a radio button	Typically uses check boxes
Better for beliefs and thoughts where we want respondents to clearly indicate their response	Better for experiences, concerns, and needs, where it is reasonable that respondents might have multiple responses.

- Option A
- Option B
- Option C
- Option D

- Option A
- Option B
- Option C
- Option D



Guidelines for Writing Closed Response Options:

- Options should be exhaustive, meaning they should include all reasonable options.
- Options should be mutual exclusive, meaning they should be unique and not overlap with each other.
- The ideal number of options tends to be between 5-7 for a forced choice question. More can make it hard for respondents to hold and evaluate all the different options.
- Clearly label your answer options with text.
- Consider whether you want a neutral option. These options are helpful when you have an engaged sample, but can lead to lazier responses when the sample is less engaged.

Using Scales to Measure Variables

Many research studies use scales to measure certain variables within their sample. A **scale** is a set of multiple questions that measure the same idea that can then be averaged together. Scales can be helpful for increasing the accuracy of your measurement and for looking at multiple dimensions of the same issue. At the same time, use of many scales can make your survey too long and cause fatigue in your respondents, which can lead to data quality issues.



Scale Example- Satisfaction with Dining Options

Response Options: Very unsatisfied (1), Unsatisfied (2), Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied (3), Satisfied (4), and Very Satisfied (5)

1. How satisfied are you with the number of dining stations in the dining hall?
2. How satisfied are you with the availability of healthy and nutritious options in the dining hall?
3. How satisfied are you with the availability of cultural and international options in the dining hall?
4. How satisfied are you with the availability of options to take to-go?

When considering whether a scale is appropriate for a variable you want to measure, guide your decision by the role the variable plays in your research question. Is this variable important for one of your main research questions? If yes, it may be good to consider a scale to enhance the accuracy of your measurement. Otherwise, you can often get what you want to know with one or two well-developed questions.

Writing Open-Ended Questions

Whereas closed questions give pre-determined response options respondents must select from, open-ended questions give respondents the space to answer in their own words. While having too many open-ended questions can exhaust your respondents, a few opportunities for respondents to explain further or voice their opinions more fully can provide rich data and allow you to learn about parts of your research topic that you hadn't anticipated. Open-ended questions are best analyzed using a qualitative approach.



Best Practices for Writing Open-Ended Questions

- Phrase your open-ended questions in an open way and avoid asking open-ended questions that could be answered in a single word.
- Tell respondents what sort of response is required or requested (numbers, words, sentences, bullet points).
- Think about how much space you want to give your participants. Is a few words sufficient? A few sentences? Paragraphs?
- You can use open-ended questions to ask for respondents to explain or provide more detail to accompany a closed response question.

Additional Resources for Question Writing

[Using and Writing Demographic Questions](#)

[Understanding Human Biases in Survey Taking](#)