

Tips for Writing Surveys

General Tips

1. Know your audience and write your survey with your audience in mind.
2. Keep your survey as short as possible – only ask for information you really need. If you already have the information, don't ask again.
3. Think about how you are going to analyze the data and how much time you have. That might influence the type of questions you ask.
4. Use closed-ended questions whenever possible. Closed-ended questions are usually more straightforward and offer choices for respondents. Too many open-ended questions may reduce the quality of the answers respondents offer.
5. Avoid adding a comments area at the end of each section or question, unless you have time for additional analysis. Let respondents know they will have a space at the end of the survey to make additional comments. Phrase that last question in an inviting way, e.g., *Please use this space for additional comments for program staff.*
6. Divide your survey into sections by themes and, if possible, keep question format consistent.
7. Proofread your survey! Have someone else proofread your survey.
8. Test or pilot your survey. This will let you know if your respondents understand the meaning and content of your questions, and that your directions are clear.
9. Thank respondents at the end of the survey in a meaningful way, e.g., *Thank you for your time and effort in completing this survey, your input will help shape future ...*

Presurvey Tips

1. Send an “alert” telling potential respondents the survey is coming, what subject heading to look for in their inbox (if using email), and how long the survey will be “open.” Doing this should increase your response rate and let you know if you have undeliverable email addresses. Then wait a day or two and send the “official” invitation with the survey URL or paper copy of the survey.
2. If not sending an alert, make sure your subject heading is well-crafted to attract your respondents' attention.

Survey Introduction

Start your survey with an introductory paragraph (or a few sentences) that includes:

- Why you are doing the survey (purpose) – be brief and make sure your respondents understand they will be helping by filling it out – that you value and need their input.
- How long it will take to fill it out and/or how many questions are on the survey – state the time in five minute increments, e.g., *This survey should take 5 – 10 minutes to complete.* Sometimes you might say it in a different way, e.g., *We are asking for five minutes of your time to...*
- How long the survey will be open – three weeks is usually long enough for most surveys.
- How respondents can get help, e.g., *If you have any questions about the survey or need technical support, please contact ...*
- An advance “thank you” statement, e.g., *We appreciate your time in offering input on the...*
- What you are going to do with the data – assure respondents of the confidentiality of their responses, e.g., *Your responses are confidential and will only be reported to program staff in aggregate form...* if their responses are not, let them know.

Survey Questions

1. Make sure you ask for just one thing in each question. It is really easy to inadvertently ask two things within one question making it very hard to interpret your results, e.g., *Is the ... meaningful*

and useful? It might be meaningful, but not useful to the respondent. The same is true for the responses you provide.

2. Ask your questions in simple, neutral language. If survey questions are too complex and/or difficult to fill out, respondents may abandon your survey. Long questions tend to cause respondents discomfort and also lead to abandonment of a survey.
3. Be very specific. If possible, ask someone else to read each question and tell you what they think you are asking.
4. The fewer “fill in the blank” and “open-ended” questions you ask, the easier it will be to analyze/interpret your results.
5. Make sure your answer choices do not overlap. Instead of 0-5, 5-10, 10-15, try 0-5, 6-10, 11-15.
6. Try not to write questions that influence respondents’ answers. An example of a “biased” question is as follows: *Should irresponsible adults who purchase alcohol for underage youth be...*

Other

When working with scale questions:

1. Have balanced intervals between answer choices. For example, in this scale “disagree, agree, somewhat agree, strongly agree”, the intervals are unbalanced and you might not get complete information about how much respondents did not agree. The scale is also biased toward agreement.
2. Keep all scales consistent, e.g., negative to positive or positive to negative, with N/A or other non-response choices at one end of your scale. Use “neutral” to really mean neutral rather than “no opinion.”

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

When asking for contact information:

There are different ways of handling this.

1. Some experts believe it should go at the beginning of a survey (kind of like getting permission to complete the survey before respondents start), but be aware that many people opt out if asked for this type of information at the beginning of a survey. This is an example where knowing your audience is important.
2. Some experts recommend that you place your request at the end of the survey. The thought is that your respondents have already become invested in the survey by that time and may be more willing to give you their contact information. When you ask, separate the contact information into several questions so that you get the information you need (if they skip one, you may still have enough information to know who it was rather than getting nothing if they skip it entirely). Ask in complete sentences, e.g., *What is your age?*
3. Other experts suggest that you ask for contact information in online surveys after respondents have clicked on the submit button. They are redirected to a new page that asks for the contact information. That way if respondents opt out, you still have their survey data.

Submit Survey

Add a thank you statement at the end of your survey. If respondents will be hearing from you before a certain date, put that at the end of your survey as well.

Need more?

Try searching online:

Writing survey questions

Tips for writing surveys

Survey development