Good Evaluation Questions:
A Checklist to Help Focus Your Evaluation

"The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question." Peter Drucker

Even though virtually all evaluation guidance materials stress the need for good evaluation questions, the evaluation literature generally has provided only broad guidance on developing them. For example, in one of the field's standard texts, Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman explain that questions must be reasonable, appropriate, and answerable (2004). Although these broad principles typically underlie evaluation processes, many evaluators— especially those new to the field or those working with partners inexperienced in evaluation—may have difficulty applying these principles to create a truly sound, meaningful question. To help get to "good questions" we aggregated and analyzed evaluation literature and solicited practice wisdom from dozens of evaluators.   From these efforts we created a checklist for use in assessing potential evaluation questions. (Please contact the checklist's authors for a list of references: mwilce@cdc.gov.)

When to use the checklist

Use the checklist as you create evaluation questions (step 3 in the CDC Framework). Using the logic model that you created in step 2, you will decide on the general focus of your evaluation. Next, you will develop and refine specific evaluation questions. This checklist can be used either as a communication tool to aid in developing the specific questions with the evaluation planning team, or as "double check" to review the questions already developed. In either case, the checklist provides a structured way to document how you selected your question(s). This documentation can be helpful in later steps, such as step 5 (justifying conclusions) and step 6 (ensuring use and lessons learned). It is also helpful for adhering to the evaluation accountability standards. For a review of the six steps in CDC's Framework for Evaluation in Public Health, see http://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework/index.htm.

When not to use the checklist

This checklist is designed for use in reviewing the overarching questions guiding an evaluation. It does not apply to the specific questions included in a data collection instrument, such as survey or interview questions.

How to use the checklist

With each question, work through the checklist, noting where you answer "yes" and where you answer "no". This may prompt you to refine the question further or to eliminate it altogether. With the exception of item 4A (which addresses ethics), it is fine for any question **not** to meet several of the criteria. The checklist will help you document possible implications (or complications).

For the final two checklist items, it is important to think of each evaluation question in the context of the other questions selected for the evaluation.   If you are using the checklist during the question development process, you may need to consult the checklist several times.

Checklist for Assessing Your Evaluation Questions

Created by CDC's National Asthma Control Program

2013

The success of an evaluation lies in appropriately focusing the overarching evaluation questions. Once you have drafted a set of potential evaluation questions, apply the criteria below to each question. Reviewing the questions may help you to identify the ones that are most likely to provide useful information. Although no set of criteria can be universally applicable, this checklist should be helpful regardless of the purpose of your evaluation.

Does the evaluation question meet this criterion?	YES	NO	Does not meet criterion but merits inclusion because…
Q1.			
1. Stakeholder engagement			
A. Diverse stakeholders, including those who can act on evaluation findings and those who will be affected by such actions (e.g., clients, staff), were engaged in developing the question.			
B. The stakeholders are committed to answering the question through an evaluation process and using the results.			
2. Appropriate fit			
A. The question is congruent with the program's theory of change.			
B. The question can be explicitly linked to program goals and objectives.			
C. The program's values are reflected in the question.			
D. The question is appropriate for the program's stage of development.			
3. Relevance			
A. The question clearly reflects the stated purpose of the evaluation.			
B. Answering the question will provide information that will be useful to at least one stakeholder.			
C. Evaluation is the best way to answer this question, rather than some other (non-evaluative) process.			
4. Feasibility			
A. It is possible to obtain an answer to the question ethically and respectfully.		Unless an acceptable option can be found, eliminate this question.	
B. Information to answer the question can be obtained with a level of accuracy acceptable to the stakeholders.			
C. Sufficient resources, including staff, money, expertise, and time can be allocated to answer the question.			
D. The question will provide enough information to be worth the effort required to answer it.			
E. The question can be answered in a timely manner, i.e., *before* any decisions potentially influenced by the information will be made.			
5. In sum…			
A. This question, in combination with the other questions proposed for this evaluation, provides a complete (enough) picture of the program.			
B. The question, in combination with the other questions proposed for this evaluation, provides enough information for stakeholders to take action.			