

Program Evaluation Tip Sheet: Constructing Survey Questions

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This tip sheet is intended for programs funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention. The document offers suggestions on writing the best possible survey questions—it is *not* intended as a comprehensive guide to survey design or methods.

Introduction. Surveys can be an important part of your evaluation efforts. Developing questions that accurately assess the opinions, experiences, and behaviors of respondents is a critical aspect of survey methods. Before launching into any survey effort make certain you know the purpose of the survey. To determine this, ask—

- **Why** are you conducting a survey? Is conducting a survey the best way to collect the information you need for your evaluation? Check for existing data sources that may meet your needs.
- **Who** are you surveying? Staff, partners, recipients, employers, providers, etc. You need to know your respondents so that you can use terms and ask questions that are relevant to them.
- **What** do you need to know? You may have a long wish list of things you would like to know—go through your list carefully and determine which ones are “need to know” rather than simply “nice to know.” You can ask yourself: If I know _____ (*fill in the blank with the information you hope to gather through the survey*), I will be able to _____ (*measure a specific outcome, for example*). It is important that you take the time upfront to determine if each question you are considering is absolutely essential.
- **How** will the survey be administered (i.e., telephone, in-person, Internet)? Your survey mode may have implications for question wording, type, placement, and survey length.

Common pitfalls to avoid when constructing your survey questions. Creating well-structured, simply written questions will help collect accurate and meaningful survey responses. The goal is to create survey questions that read well and are easy to answer. While there are no set rules on the wording of survey questions, avoiding some common pitfalls will improve the overall quality of your survey questions. The table below highlights a few of these.

Pitfall	Description	Example	Revision
Double-barreled questions	Double-barreled items contain two or more things that are being asked in a single question. It is a question that touches upon more than one issue, yet allows for only one answer.	“Do you have high blood pressure and high cholesterol?”	Separate into two questions: 1. “Do you have high blood pressure?” 2. “Do you have high cholesterol?”
Introducing bias	Leading items introduce bias and may influence the way a respondent answers a question. Also, check to make sure that a previous question does not influence how a respondent answers a later question.	“Exercising every day is important—do you exercise every day?” <input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Never	“Do you exercise every day?” <input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Never
Balanced question and response	Not including an adequate range of response categories may require respondents to choose answers that do not accurately reflect their experiences or may cause respondents to be frustrated and skip the question.	“In a typical year, how often do you visit your doctor?” <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly	“In a typical year, how often do you visit your doctor?” <input type="checkbox"/> Once per week <input type="checkbox"/> One time each month <input type="checkbox"/> Two times each year <input type="checkbox"/> One time each year <input type="checkbox"/> Never
Negative items	Answering negative questions can be confusing to your respondents.	“Do you typically not eat vegetables every day?” <input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Never	“Do you typically eat vegetables every day?” <input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Never

Please Note: These hypothetical survey questions are only intended to illustrate the pitfalls. There is no expectation that these should be adopted for use.

Question Types. Your survey questions can have several different structures that range from close-ended to open-ended. A few of the most common styles are summarized below.

Close-Ended Questions: Response categories are provided.	
Close-Ended with <u>Ordered</u> Choices	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response categories are in a specific order. Rating scales are popular ways of collecting information if you want to measure a person’s opinions, knowledge, or feelings. Note: In some cases, it may be a good idea to <u>not</u> include a neutral point, such as “Neither disagree nor agree.” However, it may be important to include a “neutral” option for a particularly sensitive question. Knowing your respondents will help you decide which way to proceed. 	<p>Example: “Do you disagree or agree with the following statement: Our community needs more sidewalks?” (select only one)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither disagree nor agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
Close-Ended with <u>Unordered</u> Choices	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response categories are in no particular order. Note: Provide instructions so your respondents know how many answers to check. If you want only one answer, then note “select only one.” 	<p>Example: “What type of physical activity or exercise do you do each week?” (select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Walk <input type="checkbox"/> Run <input type="checkbox"/> Yoga <input type="checkbox"/> Bicycle <input type="checkbox"/> Swim <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above
Partially Close-Ended	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A slight variation to the close-ended question is to include the “other, please specify” category, which allows respondents to add their own answer. 	<p>Example: “What type of physical activity or exercise do you do each week?” (select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Walk <input type="checkbox"/> Run <input type="checkbox"/> Yoga <input type="checkbox"/> Bicycle <input type="checkbox"/> Swim <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (Please specify) _____
Open-Ended Questions: Response categories are not provided.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-ended questions do not provide choices from which to select an answer. Instead respondents write an answer in their own words. 	<p>Example: In your opinion, what steps or action can you take to improve your physical health? (write in your answer)</p>

Importance of Pilot Testing. When you have drafted your questions, identify people who are similar to your intended survey respondents and ask them to complete the questionnaire to help you determine if—

- Words and terms are clear.
- Response categories are adequate.
- Format and layout are easy to follow.
- Language is culturally appropriate.
- Flow of questions is logical.
- Skip patterns make sense.
- Mechanics of survey administration are feasible.
- Length of time to complete is reasonable.

Review the results of your pilot test and determine how you will refine your survey questions. If you have made major revisions based on your pilot, you may need to pilot test your survey again.

Remember. Careful planning at the start of your survey development will help you create accurate measures and improve data quality that will contribute to your evaluation efforts. To learn more about this topic, please contact your CDC evaluation consultant or project officer.

Resources

http://www.aapor.org/Question_Wording1.htm

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/education/interpretive_analysis_questionnaire.html

http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/inforeg/statpolicy/standards_stat_surveys.pdf

To learn about concepts such as validity, reliability, and when to use specific survey methods such as telephone, in-person, Internet: <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/survey.php>

