Writing Good Survey Questions
Tips & Advice
Adapted from UCSD Student Research & Information

Step 1: Establish goals
Step 2: Develop questions and responses
Step 3: Pilot test questions
Step 4: Re-evaluate each question

General Tips

A. Identify what you want to learn.
B. Remove “wouldn’t it be nice to know” questions. Only include questions that directly shed light on what you want to learn.
C. Know how you will use and present the information.
D. Remove questions for which a respondent will not have immediate access to the information needed to answer the question (or tell the respondent beforehand what is needed).
E. Remove questions that a respondent may not be willing to answer.

Wording Questions

F. Use clear wording without abbreviations or jargon.

G. One issue, skill, ability per question. Split “double-barreled” questions into two questions
   - Problematic: I am confident in my ability to write a cover letter and resume.
   - Better: I am confident in my ability to write a cover letter.
   - Better: I am confident in my ability to write a resume.

H. Avoid double negatives
   - Problematic: I am not incompetent when I am part of a multi-disciplinary team.
     a) Strongly Disagree  b) Disagree  c) Neutral  d) Agree  e) Strong Agree
   - Better: I am competent when I am part of a multi-disciplinary team.
     a) Strongly Disagree  b) Disagree  c) Neutral  d) Agree  e) Strong Agree

I. Avoid leading questions
   - Problematic: Would you be willing to attend a weekend job fair if it increases your chances of getting a job interview?
   - Better: Would you attend a weekend job fair if it were available?

   - Problematic: To what extent do you agree that opportunities for community service are important to you?
   - Better: To what extent do you agree or disagree that opportunities for community service are important to you?
J. Make questions as specific and concrete as possible
   • **Problematic:** I am confident in my ability to communicate effectively.
   • **Better:** I am confident in my ability to present my research findings at a conference.

**Wording Responses**

K. Response alternatives should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive
   • **Problematic:** How many conferences did you attend this semester?
     a) 1    b) 2    c) 3 or more
   • **Better:** How many conferences did you attend this semester?
     a) 0    b) 1    c) 2    c) 3 or more

L. Use balanced scales (i.e., equal number of positive and negative response options)
   • **Problematic:** How would you rate on-campus apartment housing?
     a) Satisfactory
     b) Good
     c) Excellent
   • **Better:** How would you rate on-campus apartment housing?
     a) Poor
     b) Fair
     c) Good
     d) Excellent

M. Be careful where you place “No Opinion” or “Unsure.” Usually they should be placed at the end of a scale
   • **Problematic:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
     a) Strongly Disagree
     b) Disagree
     c) Unsure/No Opinion
     d) Agree
     e) Strongly Agree
   • **Better:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
     a) Strongly Disagree
     b) Disagree
     c) Agree
     d) Strongly Agree
     e) Unsure
   • **Better:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
     a) Strongly Disagree
     b) Disagree
     c) Neither Agree or Disagree
     d) Agree
     e) Strongly Agree
Writing Good Survey Questions
Useful Answer Categories

If you want to know how often something occurs, ask for the exact number of times or ask, “how often...” and choose from the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Almost Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>Fairly Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>Very Often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If you want to find out the degree of people’s feelings, their attitude, or belief, ask “to what extent...” and choose from the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Very Effective</th>
<th>Not Very Prepared</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Effective</td>
<td>Somewhat Prepared</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Effective</td>
<td>Moderately Prepared</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Effective</td>
<td>Well Prepared</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Very Satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Very Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you want to find out people’s intentions or aspirations ask, “do you expect to...” and ask them to choose from the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitely No</th>
<th>No Chance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Very Little Chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some Chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely Yes</td>
<td>Very Good Chance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: