

Basic Tips on Writing Survey Questions

Once you have a plan in place that outlines the information and topics you will cover in the survey, the next step is to decide how to gather that information. In other words, what questions do you want to ask? It is important to determine the types of questions that are most appropriate for the information you are hoping to gather.

How should I organize the survey?

It is commonly necessary to ask different types of questions that have different formats within one survey. However, in order to ensure consistency, it is best to organize the survey so that all questions in a given section are focused on the same idea or topic. This consistency will help participants to better understand the questions that are asked. For example, organize questions into separate topics and present all questions for one topic as a group before moving to the next topic (e.g., present all of the questions on group project experiences, then move on to all of the questions on satisfaction with the course).

What types of questions should I ask?

The most common type of question that is asked on a survey is the *Scale Response* question, where individuals choose a single response to a given question or statement on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Scales that are designed in this fashion are also referred to as *Likert Scales*. It is important when using this type of question and response format that the question makes sense given how the responses are phrased (see examples below).

How many response options should I include (Scale Response Questions)?

Use between five and seven response options. This decision may also be guided based upon whether or not you would like to have a mid-point or “neutral” response in the scale. Using an odd number of response options will require that a mid-point be defined in the response scale. On the other hand, an even number of response options does not allow for a mid-point. Therefore, an even number of response options is best suited for cases when a “neutral” option does not apply, or when you want to force people to endorse one way or the other.

What are some examples of response options that I could use?

There are several different forms of Scale Response questions that can be used in a survey. Example questions and response scales (containing five and seven response options) often used in surveys are provided below:

Question/Statement	Response Options						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The presentation I attended contributed to my learning.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
How satisfied are you with my accessibility outside of class (email, office hours, etc.)?	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Please rate the quality of work that you received from your partner on this project.	Poor	Fair	Neutral	Good	Excellent		
I work with my classmates regularly to help prepare for exams.	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
How would you rate the difficulty of this course compared to your other courses?	Very Difficult	Difficult	Neutral	Easy	Very Easy		
How important was the feedback that I provided on your paper to improving the final draft?	Not at all Important	Of Limited Importance	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important		

Note: Either of the above 7-option response scales can be translated into a 6-option scale by omitting option "4" or into a 5-option scale by omitting options "3" and "5." I do not recommend shortening the 5-option response scale further.

How should I phrase the survey questions?

When writing survey questions, it is important to make sure that the questions are clear, simple, and to the point. Survey questions may be phrased in positive terms (high ratings indicate a more *positive* response) or negative terms (high ratings indicate a more *negative* response). Negatively worded questions, though they should be used sparingly, are useful to ensure that survey participants are taking the appropriate time to read and understand the question before responding. Keep in mind that using negatively worded questions will impact the manner in which you analyze the results of the survey.

What are some important tips for writing survey questions?

It is important to take care in developing high quality survey questions so as to ensure that the information you are gathering is reliable (i.e., the information is consistent) and valid (i.e., you are measuring the intended information). Some general guidelines:

- Avoid statements that can have more than one interpretation.
- Avoid statements that are likely to be endorsed by almost everyone or almost no one.
- Avoid using universal or absolute terms such as all, always, never, or none in the question/statement.
- Statements should be short (ideally should not exceed 20 words).
- Each statement should be a proper grammatical sentence.
- Statements should be in simple sentences rather than complex or compound statements (i.e., avoid using "and/or").
- Each question/statement should address one idea at a time.

What are some other useful types of survey questions?

- **Open-Text Response** – These questions ask students to provide their open-ended comments/feedback on certain topics.
- Example open-text response question:

Question/Statement	Open Text Response
If given the opportunity, what would you change about this class?	[Student types and/or writes the response in this space.]

- **Rank Order** – These questions ask students to prioritize, or rank, different options in order of their preference, importance, etc.
- Example rank-order response question:

Question/Statement	Options to be Ranked in Response	
We have two “TBD” days built into the syllabus. Rank the following topic options in terms of your interest (1 = most interested; 5 = least interested). We will cover the two most popular topics.	Options	Rank
	Self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame)	1
	Religion & self-regulation	4
	Self-regulation in young children	3
	Habits & automatic goals	2
	Procrastination	5

- **Multiple Response** – These questions ask survey participants to choose more than one response (e.g., “Select all of the options that apply”)
- Example multiple-response survey question:

Question/Statement	Options to be Selected in Response	
What activities did you find helpful when studying for your exams? (Please select all that apply.)	Options	Response
	Attending professor’s office hours	
	Attending review session	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Informal, in-person studying with peers	
	Using Piazza site for the class	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Completing the review sheet	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>