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Good, bad, or biased? Using best practices to improve the quality of your survey questions.

Eleta Exline, University Library, University of New Hampshire

Introduction

Surveys can be an effective tool for gathering information from library users and assessing library services. Flawed survey questions may confuse and frustrate users, resulting in poor survey response rates and inaccurate or difficult to interpret results. Learning best practices for writing effective survey questions will improve your survey outcomes and maintain the goodwill of your users.

Begin with a plan

Before you begin drafting your survey questions, take some time to make a plan. A basic survey plan should answer these questions:

1. What do you want to learn from your research?
2. What group of people you are interested in learning about?
3. Who will you ask to take your survey?
4. How will you administer your survey?
5. How will you use the information you gather?

Your survey plan will guide you as you decide which questions to ask and how to format them. A plan will also make it easier to apply for IRB approval if your research requires that you do so.

End with a pretest

Pretesting your survey will uncover problems with your survey design, such as confusing instructions, poor layout, ineffective question language, mismatched response options, and excessive survey length.

One method for pretesting is the *debriefing interview*. Ask several individuals to take your survey and record any problems or confusing items as they go. Talk to your test participants individually about the survey process.

Another method is the *cognitive interview* or "think out loud" method. Ask your testers to talk about the survey as they are taking it. As needed, prompt with questions like "what were you thinking when you answered that question?," "what do you think you should do here?," and "what are you thinking right now?" Have a helper take notes.

Best practices for writing survey questions*

Be clear. Questions should be unambiguous and free from jargon that the respondent might not understand. Avoid vague terms. If the question might be misinterpreted, misunderstood, or have multiple meanings, find a clearer way of stating it.

Be brief. The respondent should be able to read and understand questions quickly.

Avoid "double barreled" questions. Make sure that each question addresses a single concept. Most survey questions should *not* contain the words "and" or "or" as a ways of linking two different concepts together. Ask two or more separate questions instead.

Ask questions the respondent can answer. Do not assume the respondent has in-depth awareness of current events, popular culture, or history. Do not ask people to recall past events that most people would not accurately remember. If your population is a particular group that would be expected to understand specific concepts and language, such as members of a profession, compose questions accordingly.

Ask questions the respondent will answer. Even in an anonymous survey, people may be reluctant to reveal private information, report negative behavior, or offer opinions on sensitive subjects. Be aware that even if these questions are answered, the respondent may be likely to report information, behaviors, and opinions that are more socially acceptable than accurate. This is called *social desirability bias*.

Avoid biased language. Terms that are associated with political rhetoric and words that have complex social histories may also result in *social desirability bias*. State your ideas in neutral terms and language that is not "loaded" with extra meaning.

Avoid leading questions. Leading questions assume a desired answer in the content of the question, leading to either an annoyed participant (if he or she disagrees with the assumed right answer) or *social desirability bias*.

Ask relevant questions. Questions should apply to most respondents being surveyed and to your research questions. Irrelevant questions are annoying and will result in survey drop-out. If you know some of your questions are relevant to only part of your population, use a filter question that allows others to skip the question.

Avoid negative terms. State questions in the positive – avoid the use of "not" in your questions. When asked to agree or disagree with a negatively stated question, many respondents will be confused and pick the opposite of what they intend.

Questions and response options must match. There are many formats for questions and responses. Whether you use a multiple choice question, provide a space for an open ended response, or construct a Likert-type scale, all wording and instructions must be consistent and clear.

- Have you ever attended a bibliographic instruction session?
- Have you ever attended a library class or workshop on searching for articles or books?

- When was the last time you visited the library or checked out a book?
- How many times per week do you go to the library?
- How recently have you checked out a book from the library?

- Do you text in class when you are supposed to be paying attention?
- How often do you text during class?

Social desirability bias is the tendency to exaggerate "good" qualities or behaviors and minimize "bad" ones. Students may say they study more than they do, and practically everyone will say they exercise more or eat better than they do. Which topics are most sensitive or which behaviors most desirable may depend on social and cultural factors. Be particularly careful to use neutral wording when the question involves income, religion, politics, prejudice, violence, illegal acts, the body, or other sensitive topics. Do not include such questions unless you must.

- Since education is so important, don't you agree that we should fund it better?
- Do you think that education in New Hampshire is adequately funded?

- Why would you choose not to study at the library?
- Where do you choose to study most often?

Summary: make a survey plan, write good questions, and pretest your survey.

*List adapted from Babbie, E. R. (2005). *The basics of social research*. Belmont, Calif: Thomson/Wadsworth.