

Developing Quality Survey Questions

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The MEZCOPH SVPEP team has developed the following overview on how to develop good survey questions. Surveys (i.e., pre and post-tests) consist of questions and format for the responses. Developing a good survey is a science in itself, but can be achieved with planning and pilot testing. The best survey questions follow the principles listed below. They are also administered in an order that promotes good flow¹ throughout the survey document.

What makes an ideal survey question?

- *It is objective:* Surveys should be neutral in language and question wording. *Questions should* not lead the respondent to select a specific answer. An example of a leading question is “We recently won an award for our program, what are your feelings of our top-rated program?” A non-leading question is “What are your thoughts on our program?”
- *References or stimulates recall of the participants’ knowledge:* A good survey question will test the knowledge gained by a recent activity/presentation, using clear examples from the activity/presentation. To continue to provide clarity, a time reference, such as last week or one month ago, should be provided. This is important if there is a time lag between the respondent’s participation and the survey administration.
- *Provides motivation for participation:* If the survey is too long, confusing, or unclear, the participants are less likely to be motivated to finish or participate in the survey. They may also provide the same responses over and over again in order to reach the end. Motivation to complete the survey may be enhanced using contests or raffles for a prize at the end of the survey.
- *Is brief:* The best questions are brief. Longer questions can become confusing and can also be easily misinterpreted.

¹ From Survey Monkey’s Smart Survey Design, “The question sequence in the survey body should take on a flow of ideas and be geared towards the respondents’ abilities. After you have established the first general topic, all related questions should come up before a second topic is raised.” (Survey Monkey, 2014, pg. 15).

- *Is clear:* The clarity of the survey question can be strengthened by creating clear instructions, using separate survey pages, and choosing question wording that is brief and easy to understand.
- *Is free of assumptions:* Do not assume to understand the baseline knowledge of the participant. This is related to the issue of clarity. When a participant spends too much time on any given question they may select an unexpected answer or they may quit taking the survey out of frustration.
- *Is free of professional jargon:* Do not assume that professional jargon is understood by all participants. It is best to spell out all acronyms and abbreviations, and keep the wording of the question brief and clear. For example, SAAM (Sexual Assault Awareness Month) may be well known to those in the sexual assault field, but the acronym may be unclear to others.
- *Uses non-scientific language:* Some complex theories and scientific language may result in unclear questions and respondent confusion.

Resources:

For additional assistance, see the Research Methods Knowledge Database's webpage on [survey design](#).

[What is a survey?](#) A downloadable and free handbook created by the American Statistical Association, which provides a basic overview of the survey process.

Survey Monkey's downloadable publication, [Smart Survey Design](#).

Suggested Readings:

Bradburn, N. M., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions: the definitive guide to questionnaire design--for market research, political polls, and social and health questionnaires*. John Wiley & Sons.

Haladyna, T. M., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2013). *Developing and validating test items*. Routledge.

Krosnick, J. A., & Presser, S. (2010). Question and questionnaire design. *Handbook of survey research*, 2, 263-314.

Lyberg, L. E., Biemer, P., Collins, M., De Leeuw, E. D., Dippo, C., Schwarz, N., & Trewin, D. (Eds.). (2012). *Survey measurement and process quality* (Vol. 999). John Wiley & Sons.