



“Pitfalls in Survey Design and How to Avoid Them”

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Do's and Don'ts of Survey Design

Wording

<u>Don'ts</u>	<u>Do's</u>
1. Don't use loaded or leading questions.	1. Do ask direct and unbiased questions so that you are more likely to get data that is true and honest.
2. Don't use non-exhaustive listings.	2. Do make sure that your response items cover the majority of potential responses or include an “other (please describe)” option.
3. Don't use confusing or unfamiliar words.	3. Do use plain language that will be easily understood by potential participants.
4. Don't ask two questions in one item (double barreled questions).	4. Do ask one question at a time.
5. Don't use generic or agreement anchors.	5. Do use specific descriptions of anchors that relate to the construct in question.
6. Don't use negatively worded questions.	6. Do word questions positively.
7. Don't use statements.	7. Do ask actual questions.
8. Don't use too few or too many response anchors.	8. Do use at least five and not more than 9 response anchors to optimize reliability of your survey.
9. Don't use absolutes in questions (all, always, never, etc).	9. Do provide response options that reflect the necessary degree flexibility in the human experience.

Visual Display and Organization

Don'ts

1. Don't label the end anchors only.
2. Don't use multiple anchor labels (i.e. numbers and words).
3. Don't use unequal spacing of equally important response options.
4. Don't place nonessential response options together with essential ones.
5. Don't jump around from various topics without any coherent flow.
6. Don't force respondents to answer a question (online).
7. Don't make your survey >1,000 words.
8. Don't use "reverse scored" items.
9. Don't ask important items late in the survey.
10. Don't ask sensitive items early in the survey.

Do's

1. Do label all response anchors.
2. Do use only one kind of anchor label (preferably words).
3. Do space all substantive response items equidistant on the page.
4. Do separate nonessential (i.e. N/A) response items from essential ones with additional space.
5. Do structure your survey in an organized way, ideally from broad questions to narrow and with a logical flow from one topic area to another.
6. Do allow respondents to skip questions they do not possess the information to accurately answer or do not feel comfortable answering.
7. Do make your survey as short as possible, including only items that are necessary to answer your study question.
8. Do use a standard scale for numerical response items.
9. Do ask important items early in the survey.
10. Do ask more sensitive items later in the survey after you have allowed for some trust building and allow participants to skip these items.

Selected Resources

Artino AR Jr, La Rochelle JS, Dezee KJ, Gehlbach H. Developing questionnaires for education research: AMEE Guide No. 87. *Med Teach*. 2014;36(6):463-74.

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Rickards G, Magee C, Artino AR Jr. You Can't Fix by Analysis What You've Spoiled by Design: Developing Survey Instruments and Collecting Validity Evidence. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2012;4(4):407-10.

Gehlbach H. Survey Design Checklist. Available at https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/459153/Panorama_January2019%20Docs/checklist.pdf

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