



## Institutional Research Department

As you design your survey questions, there are many resources on the internet to help you. Here are some common survey question mistakes:

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### 1. Asking Leading Questions

Subtle wording differences can produce great differences in results. Non-specific words and ideas can cause a certain level of confusing ambiguity in your survey. “Could,” “should,” and “might” all sound about the same, but may produce a difference in agreement to a question.

In addition, strong words such as “force” and “prohibit” represent control or action and can bias your results.

**Example: The government should force you to pay higher taxes.**

No one likes to be forced, and no one likes higher taxes. The wording of this agreement scale question makes it sound doubly bad to raise taxes.

**Suggestion:** The government should increase taxes. The government needs to increase taxes.

**Example: How would you rate the career of legendary outfielder Joe Dimaggio?**

This survey question tells you Joe Dimaggio is a legendary outfielder. This type of wording can bias respondents.

**Suggestion:** How would you rate the career of baseball outfielder Joe Dimaggio?

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### 2. Asking Vague Questions

Questions that are vague and do not communicate your intent can limit the usefulness of your results. Make sure respondents know what you are asking.

**Example: What do you like to do for fun?**

Finding out that respondents like to play a specific video game, go out with friends, or go sky diving may or may not be what the question is really asking. A respondent could take this question in many directions.

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### 3. Offering Vague Answer Choices or Not Enough Answer Choices

Do you have all of the options covered? Multiple choice response options should be mutually exclusive and not be ambiguous.

**Example: What is your age? 10-20/ 20-30/ 30-40/ 40+**

What answer would someone select if they were age 20, or 30?

**Example: What type of vehicle do you own? Van; SUV; motorcycle**

What if the respondent owns multiple vehicles, other kinds of vehicles or no vehicle at all?

**Example: You indicated that you shop at Steve's Shoppe once every 6 months. Why don't you shop there more often? There isn't one near my house/ I have never heard of it**

This question doesn't include other possible options such as price/value or some "other" reason.

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#### **4. Poor Use of Likert Scales**

The bottom point should be the worst possible and top point as the best possible. Then evenly spread the labels for your scale points in-between.

**Example: What is your opinion of the Hotel Center? Pretty good; Great; Fantastic; Incredible; The Best Ever**

This question puts the center of the scale at fantastic, and the lowest possible rating as "Pretty Good." This question is not capable of collecting true opinions of respondents.

**Here are some suggestions of good equidistant choices:**

Strongly disagree/ Disagree/ Neither agree nor disagree/ Agree/ Strongly agree

Very Likely/ Likely/ Neutral/ Not Likely/ Very Unlikely

Very Happy/ Somewhat Happy/ Neutral/ Not Very Happy/ Not at All Happy

Almost Always True/ Usually True/ Occasionally True/ Usually Not True/ Almost Never True

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#### **5. Asking About Multiple Items in One Question**

Make sure that your question is clear and focused.

**Example: How useful will this workshop be for students and young professionals in the field?**

This question is asking about two different groups of people who could have different opinions.

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#### **6. Using Absolute statements**

**Example: Do you always eat breakfast? Yes/ No**

Questions with "always," "all," "every," "ever," etc. in them will not provide useful feedback. These poorly, inflexible kind of questions usually have the options Yes/No. Instead, the question should have a variety of options that people can choose from.

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**Suggestion:** How many days a week do you usually eat breakfast? Every day/ 5-6 days/ 3-4 days/ 1-2 days/ I usually don't eat breakfast

## 7. Not Offering a “Prefer Not to Answer” Option

Questions about income, occupation, finances, family life, personal hygiene, personal, political, or religious beliefs can feel too intrusive and should be asked only when necessary.

Privacy is an important issue to most people. Incentives and assurances of confidentiality can help make it easier to obtain some private information, but many respondents appreciate a “prefer not to answer” option. While some may choose to skip a question, others may stop and discontinue answering the survey entirely.