Tips for Writing Good Survey Questions

# Tip 1: Create a goal and/or learning objective for your survey

Align questions with the goals and objectives of the survey. Eliminate questions that are not directly linked. Even though it is common to see demographic or identifying questions on a survey, they are not required. We suggest you only ask these types of questions (race, student ID, age, income, sex/gender, religious, political affiliation, etc.) if they are directly linked to the goals and objectives of the survey. Respect the time & privacy of your respondents by only collecting the information you need!

# Tip 2: Use inclusive language

Capturing your respondents' identity (gender-identity, sexual-orientation, sex, race, and/or ethnicity) can be difficult. **The most inclusive way to collect identity data on a survey is an open response**. However, Survey Gizmo will not automatically count/chart open response data. Survey Gizmo will only collect the open response data and you will have to tag and/or analyze by hand. If an open response question is not the right fit for your survey needs, use a complete list of options and allow respondents an option to choose not to answer and check multiple items (when applicable). Here are some sample questions adapted from the Human Rights Campaign, American University's Center for Diversity & Inclusion, and the 2013 NSSE Survey:

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| **Question Wording** | **Answer Choices** |  |
| What is your gender? | Male; Female | **X** |
| What is your gender identity? | Man; Woman; Another Gender Identity, Please Specify\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_; Prefer Not to Say | Acceptable  |
| To which gender identity do you most identify?  | Woman; Man; Transwoman; Transman; Genderqueer; Not Listed, Please Specify \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_; Prefer Not to Say | Acceptable  |
| Gender: | \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ | **Best practice!** |

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| **Question Wording** | **Answer Choices** |  |
| What is your racial and/or ethnic identification? **(Select one)** | American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White; Not Listed; I prefer not to respond | **X** |
| What is your racial and/or ethnic identification? **(Select all that apply)** | American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White; Not Listed; I prefer not to respond | Acceptable  |
| Racial and/or Ethnic Identification: | \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ | **Best practice!** |

Avoid using the word OTHER as an answer choice on demographic questions. It can be interpreted as marginalizing. Instead use NOT LISTED. It is recommended to ask identifying questions at the **end** of a survey. This allows respondents to determine their level of comfort with the sensitivity of information they share. Don’t require demographic questions. Always include the choice not to respond!

# Tip 3: Keep your survey short

Any survey above 5 minutes is considered long. By following Tip 1, you should be able to keep your survey to an appropriate length. If not, consider splitting your survey up into two parts. If 5 minutes or less is not an option, **add clear messaging** in the invitation to take the survey. Be honest about how long the survey will take. Don’t use the words “brief” or “short” if you know the survey is longer than 5 minutes. Let your audience know you value their time and provide them with a transparent explanation of the purpose of the survey.

Use logic to shorten the amount of questions the respondents see. Logic eliminates questions that aren’t related to a specific response. For example:

Do you have a pet? Yes; No

By using logic you can have a respondent choosing “No” be directed to the next question:

 How many times in the past month have you visited a park? 0; 1-3; 4-6; 7-9; 10+

While a respondent choosing “Yes” sees a follow-up question:

What type of pet do you currently own? Dog; Cat; Fish; Bird; Not Listed

# Tip 4: Questions should be easy to understand

Spend time reviewing your questions to make sure they are specific and clear. Have other people also review your questions (see Tip 5).

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| **Non-Specific/Unclear Question** | **Better Option** |
| Which is true? | Which describes your most recent interaction? |

Avoid conjunctions – and, but, or, nor, yet… A conjunction is a sure sign that you need to be asking two questions instead of one.

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| **Two Questions in One** | **Better Option** |
| How likely are you to go to dinner and a movie this weekend? | Question 1: How likely are you to go to dinner this weekend?Question 2: How likely are you to go to a movie this weekend? |

Avoid bias and leading questions. Allow the respondent to make their own judgements.

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| **Biased/Leading Question** | **Better Option** |
| How would you rate your recent dining experience at our five-star restaurant? | How would you rate your recent dining experience at our restaurant? |

# Tip 5: Test! Test! Test!

By following Tips 1 – 4, you should have eliminated many of the roadblocks that cause respondents to experience “survey-fatigue” and give up on completing your survey.

One of the best ways to identify potential problems in your survey is to send out a test survey before it goes live. Have at least a couple people read through the survey to make sure questions are clear and to get an idea of how long the survey takes to complete. As a best practice, always test your survey before it goes live!