Surveying Students at UC Merced

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Good Practice for Writing Great Surveys
Ask a specific question

For example, it may not be a good idea to ask for something like “Age.” Instead, a better question would be, “What is your current age?”
Do not overdo options

• It is best to simplify options because it is more difficult to explain the differences between more options (and difficult to make more adjectives to differentiate).
• See example on next slide, as “agree” is expanded on perhaps too much.
• There is a tendency in summaries to divide results into 2 halves anyway, so why waste respondents’ time?
Do not overdo options (Example)

Sample Questions

The following questionnaire was created using software developed by the Office of Information Technology at the University of Maryland. We give examples here of several of the question types available with simple tools. Many tools such as this allow creation of questions with simple HTML tags for formatting like BOLD, underline and italic.

1. Multiple-choice questions are:
   a. "Always Useful"
   b. "Seldom Useful"
   c. "Depends on the situation"

2. Multiple-select questions give respondents more flexibility in giving input of feedback.
   a. "The respondent may want to choose this answer."
   b. "And/or choose this answer."
   c. "Or even this answer."

3. Likert scale questions can be highly effective, but come with their own caveats.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. Short answers can be useful if you have a coding system to process the responses you will get or if you have a very small set of respondents. For larger samples with reasonably few possible responses however, they can create a data processing problem.

5. True-false questions and yes-no questions are essentially the same thing but one wording or the other may be preferable.
Do not overlap options

What are the greatest obstacles to your attaining your financial goals
(what’s been holding you back from the success you desire)?

How much time are you willing to dedicate each week to change your financial future?
- Less than 1 hour
- 1 - 3 hours
- 3 - 6 hours
- 6 - 8 hours
- 8 - 12 hours
- More than 12 hours

How much money do you need monthly to be financially independent?
Avoid double-barreled questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We understood your enquiry or problem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We gave you the feeling that we cared about you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We gave you the confidence that we could resolve the matter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our staff were clear and easy to understand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our staff were patient, helpful and efficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We followed up our promises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We met the timescales we indicated to you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Know Your Respondents

• If possible, it is always good to interview a couple members of your survey population to gain insight on what responses may look like

• For example, the maximum household income reported on UCUES is $200,000 plus, so adding extra options is superfluous (see next slide for example)
Know Your Respondents

Which best describes the total combined income before taxes of all members of your household in 2011. (Please include all income for yourself and all persons living in your household from all sources. For example: $30,000 to $49,999)

- Under $50,000
- $50,000 to $74,999
- $75,000 to $99,999
- $100,000 to $149,999
- $150,000 to $199,000
- $200,000 to $299,999
- $300,000 to $399,000
- $400,000 to $499,000
- $500,000 to $749,999
- $750,000 to $999,999
- $1.0 million to $1.4 million
- $1.5 million to $1.9 million
- $2.0 million to $2.4 million
- $3.0 million to $4.0 million
- Over $4.0 million
- Prefer not to answer

Wow!
Label each option

Could you please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of our service by placing a cross at the point of the line that most corresponds to your response. Please record any comments or explanation in the space below:

1. The helpfulness of our staff
   - Externally Satisfied
   - Neutral
   - Externally Dissatisfied
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. The length of time it took you to access our services
   - Externally Satisfied
   - Neutral
   - Externally Dissatisfied
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Be sensitive to language, as it can impact response rates

7. Provide a question for a survey that does not take into account cultural sensitivity.

Pick your favourite color:
- Hitler orange
- Stalin red
- Kim-Jung Il yellow
- Christmas blue
- My beliefs are better than yours green
- Racist black
- white.

No
13. What is your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual
- Gay/Lesbian
- Heterosexual
- Questioning/Unsure
- Self-identified Queer
- Decline to state
- Other
Be sensitive about language

• Proposed changes to include this set of response choices (as of 2012): lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, heterosexual/straight, questioning, asexual, decline to state, same gender loving, two-Spirit, nonmonosexual, and pansexual/omnisexual

• See next slide for explanation
Be sensitive about language (continued)

- The argument is that it is frustrating/hurtful for someone not to see the orientation they associate with listed on the question. There needs to be a balance between an overwhelming number of options with the feelings of respondents.
Recommended resources

- Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method
  - Don A. Dillman

- Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods
  - Peter M. Nardi

- Survey Research Methods
  - Floyd J. Fowler, Jr.
A Well-built, Sustainable Survey Process

• For more information about how to design a survey, please visit our resources page.

• If you have any questions, contact your school or unit assessment specialist.