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# RESEARCH TIPS

Research and Institutional Effectiveness

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## Designing Surveys

So, you want to create questions for a survey? Would you like to know what to do and what to avoid? My recipe includes the following: theme selection; wording; response choices; questions; and formatting.

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### Theme

I know this point sounds basic, but it is one way to decrease your work, focus you and increase the probability that you will obtain answers to questions that will help you. Decide all the possible areas you would like to know more about. How do you narrow down the number of themes? The easiest way to determine an objective is to pose the question: why you are going to be asking people to complete your survey? What is your goal? And is it something which is measurable?

Once you have your goals determined, your themes should be related directly to those goals. Next, create questions for each of these areas. Look at your questions a second time. Think ahead. What are you going to do with the information that each yields? Will you use it to change things? If so, consider keeping that question. Are you just interested in the answer and are not going to do anything with the information? If so, consider deleting the question.

### Wording

There are a number of considerations to make your question easy to understand and interpreted similarly by most (if not all) your students. Firstly, determine a feasible number of questions. Prepare appropriately worded, meaningful questions. Ask valid questions that:

- ◆ make sense to the respondent:
- ◆ are concrete (e.g., What do you like the most about this course?);
- ◆ use time periods that are related to the importance of the question (e.g., within the last week):
- ◆ use easy to understand language (i.e., grade 9 or lower reading level)
- ◆ use shorter rather than long questions
- ◆ avoid biasing words (e.g., What do you thin of this useful legislation?)
- ◆ avoid two-edge questions (e.g., using 'and' 'or')
- ◆ avoid negative phrasing (e.g., Why you would not liked a poke in the eye?)

### Response Choices

Fink (1995) suggests response choice considerations such as:

- ◆ *Choosing an appropriate type of response option* (e.g., very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied)
  - ◆ *Balancing all responses on a scale.* Assign a numeric value for each: very dissatisfied = 1, dissatisfied = 2, neutral = 3, etc.
  - ◆ *Selecting neutral categories.* A neutral category is the midpoint on an odd numbered point scale (e.g., 5 or 7 point scale). If you felt your respondents have a strong opinion on the topic, do not give them a neutral
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choice because it is less likely they will choose it (they are already "for" or "against" your topic). If you feel your respondents do not have a strong opinion on the topic, then give them the neutral category-- however, should you feel that if the majority circled neutral you wouldn't know what to improve or not, then perhaps a neutral category is not useful to you.

- ◆ *Determining how many points to include on a rating scale.* My recommendation is 5, 6, or 7, points - use 5 or 7 points if you want to give them a midpoint or neutral choice (see previous point)
- ◆ *Deciding where to place the positive or negative end of the scale.* My recommendation is the negative choices should be on the left-hand side starting at the number '1' while the most positive answer be at the far right-hand side of your scale. That way, the higher the number, the more positive the answer.
- ◆ *Determining the proper use of skip patterns.* Give respondents clear directions on the survey when you would like to have people skip questions that are not applicable to them. Typically, people do NOT follow the directions, so try to minimize your skips.

### **Number of questions**

Actually, it is not so much the number of questions that concern the survey respondent but how long it takes them to complete the survey and how intimidating it looks. If you are formatting your survey, it should be no longer than four pages with lots of white space. If you are using a scanning system, it should be no longer than one double-sided page. Completion time should be 20 minutes or less. Ask some students to complete the survey – it will be your 'test' of its worth. Ask students to indicate how long it took them to do the survey and anything they did not understand.

I am going to sneak in my opinion on the types of questions you should have on your survey. We all know it's easy to look at how many people circled the number '1' versus '5' on a point scale. You can also easily examine the 'mean' or 'average' score to determine how positive or negative people are about that particular item. I value these types of close-ended, pre-determined choice questions.

I also value open-ended or write-whatever-you-want type of questions (e.g., "Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience with xyz?"). Open-ended questions allow your respondents to tell you positive and negative things both related and unrelated to your topic. The value of these is evident when you see a wonderfully positive statement. The value is equally evident when the negative statement(s) are compiled and you think about their meaning and their truth. What I particularly like about open-ended questions are those answer/comments/suggestions which tell you there are other questions you might wish to add to your survey.

### **Formatting**

Remember your school teachers explaining the virtue of being neat? Your students will appreciate the neatness of your survey and your attention to detail. The first page should look as easy as possible to complete. You may create more white space on the first page to make it look "friendly." Be consistent in grouping your questions so that questions with the same theme or response choices are grouped in the same are (e.g., all satisfaction questions grouped together). Grouping decreases time required to re-orient your respondents' thought processes between questions; thus, reducing the time required to complete the survey.

Research can be fun - even if you find it incredibly boring! Add fun clip-art to your survey. I once copied (with permission) some drawings, which were placed throughout the survey to encourage the respondents to keep going. Near the end of the survey was a drawing of a lady standing at the top of a mountain about to walk down. The caption read, *Half-way there - you can do it!* Granted, this example may not be the greatest, but I'm sure you got the point. Have some fun, both for your sake and for your respondents' sakes.

Fink, A. (1995). *How to ask survey questions*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc.

Above article has been reprinted from Silverman, B. (January 24, 2000). Designing surveys. Centinel, Centennial College, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada.