

Designing Survey Questions

Background: This resource provides information on general considerations for writing survey questions and examples of survey question types.

General Considerations

1. Don't reinvent the wheel:

As a first step, look at questions that have already been written by reputable organizations. Consider asking someone with experience in program evaluation at your agency or training system for resources.

Source for pre-existing questions related to the child welfare:

<https://www.cebc4cw.org/assessment-tools/>

2. Pre-test your survey:

Administer your survey to a test group to get feedback. Ask people to think out loud after looking at your survey questions. "What does that question mean to you?"

3. Keep your survey short (do not exceed 10-20 minutes).

4. Keep question order in mind:

Try a funnel approach. Broad and general questions at the beginning as a warm-up. Then move to more specific questions. Ask any sensitive questions near the end of the survey. Last, place general easy to answer questions (like demographics) at the end.

5. Start with a short introduction:

Let respondents know how the information will be used. Inform respondents if their responses will be 1) anonymous or not and 2) kept confidential, if applicable.

6. At the end, thank respondents for their time.

Types of Questions	
Open Ended Questions:	Close Ended Questions:
Description: Ask respondents to respond to a question in their own terms.	Description: Ask respondents to place themselves into one or more of a limited number of provided options. The best questions have responses that are: exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and put in a clear, logical order.
Pros: Allow greatest variety of response.	Pros: Allows you to compare responses between individuals. Easier to analyze and report on with graphs/tables.
Cons: Time-consuming for respondent and some may answer with much more detail than others. These questions also require more work for you to analyze. Respondents are also more likely to skip an open-ended question on a written survey.	Cons: Requires the survey designer to understand the full variety of questions to ask and to be able to list all relevant options for responses to get rich information.

Tips on Question Wording

TIPS	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLES
Use simple wording	Do not: use abbreviations, jargon, foreign words, technical terms, words with double meanings.	AODA (Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse) Mke (Milwaukee)
Be specific and clear	Do not: use vague or general words Vague words to avoid: most, numerous, many, often, several. More commonly understood words: almost all, a majority of, almost none, a few.	1. Often (Instead use daily, weekly) 2. Last year (Instead use 2018, last 12 months)
Avoid bias and making assumptions	Avoid words with strong positive or negative emotional appeal; do not ask leading questions.	1. "As a supervisor, resolving conflicts among your staff is very important—how often do you try to resolve staff conflicts when they arise?" a. Always, b. Sometimes, c. Never (Leading question , start the question at 'how')
Avoid double-barreled questions	Do not ask two questions in one question or assume two things are necessarily linked.	1. "How many years have you worked at your agency and in child welfare overall?" (Instead separate into 2 questions - Agency? Child welfare?) 2. Do you think of basketball players as being independent agents or as employees of their team? (Answer could be both)
Offer an "out" for questions that do not apply to respondents	Do not force respondents to answer if they may not have experience or don't know. Provide options such as : Does not apply, Don't know, Prefer Not to Answer.	
Balanced question and response	Include an adequate range of response categories.	1. "How frequently does your job require you to interact with this service provider?" a. Weekly, b. Monthly (Offer a wider range of choices: a. Once per week, b. One time each month, c. Two times each year, d. One time each year, e. Never).
Negative Items	Answering negative questions can be confusing to your respondents.	1. "Do you typically not notify your supervisor when your caseload becomes too high?" a. Always, b. Sometimes, c. Never (Instead remove 'not').

Survey Question Examples

TYPE	QUESTION FORM	EXAMPLES	TIPS
Open-ended (Subjective)	Short answer	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you like? 2. What was helpful? 3. What would you like to change? 4. What could be improved? 5. What surprised you? 6. Have you ever experienced...? If so, please describe what happened. 	
Close-ended (Subjective)	Agree-disagree statements	<p>Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: I am committed to staying at this agency.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p>	<p>Helpful for measuring a person's opinions, knowledge, or feelings.</p> <p>In some cases, it may be a good idea to not include a neutral point, such as "Neither disagree nor agree." However, it may be important to include a "neutral" option for a particularly sensitive question. Knowing your respondents will help you decide which way to proceed.</p>
Close-ended (Subjective)	Response categories	<p>Which of the following service providers do you interact with most frequently? (select all that apply)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health Therapists <input type="checkbox"/> Substance Abuse Counselors <input type="checkbox"/> Sex Abuse Therapists <input type="checkbox"/> In-Home therapists/in-home family preservation workers</p>	<p>Provide instructions so respondents know how many answers (e.g. one or more than one).</p> <p>You may include "other, please specify" if you want to allow respondents to add their own categories.</p>
Close-ended (Subjective)	Rankings	<p>Please rank the following activities in order of importance to you with 1 being most important and 4 being least important:</p> <p>What are the primary reasons that you stay in your job?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The schedule works well for me <input type="checkbox"/> It fits with my family life <input type="checkbox"/> I like the job location <input type="checkbox"/> It matches my skill set</p>	
Close-ended (Subjective)	Ratings	<p>Please indicate how frequently staff in your agency engage in the following activities using the following rating scale: 1 = Almost Never, 2 = Sometimes (about 25% of the time), 3 = About half the time, 4 = Usually (about 75% of the time), 5 = Almost Always</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff discuss new evidence-based practice. 2. Staff look for new and better ways to meet the needs of families 	

TYPE	QUESTION FORM	EXAMPLES	TIPS
Close-ended (Objective/factual)	Demographics or characteristics	1. In what year were you born? 2. What is your race (provide categories)?	Demographics and characteristics can include: ability/disability status, age, citizenship status, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, job classification, employer name, place of residence.
Close-ended (Objective/factual)	Occurrence or frequency	1. Did something happen (yes/no)? 2. How many times something happened (count) during a specified time period? (e.g. a. Please consider whether in the past 6 months, you have been yelled at by a client. Rating scale: 0= No, 1=Yes) 3. The date on which something happened? (e.g. In what month and year did you receive your MSW?)	For some frequency items, it can be helpful to provide respondents with a range of frequencies to respond to (e.g. 0 1 year, 1 3 years, 3 5 years, 5+ years)
Close-ended (Objective/factual)	Amount (severity, depth, effort, ect.) of something	1. Please reflect on the amount of time you spend each day on each type of work task. Report your total number of hours spent on average in each of your workdays. Then report what percentage of time at work is spent on each activity (your responses must total 100%).	

Common Rating Scale Examples

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Very Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Excellent
Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Almost never	Sometimes (about 25% of the time)	About half the time (50%)	Usually (about 75% of the time)	Always

References:

Harvard University Program on Survey Research (2007). *Tip sheet on question wording*. Available at: https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/files/psr/files/PSRQuestionnaireTipSheet_0.pdf

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