

Dalia



Survey writing tips

A short collection of things we've learned about writing great surveys, especially for mobile devices

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Keep it short and sweet

We learned that writing great surveys for mobile is not only about adapting to small screen sizes, but also about rethinking surveys from a respondent's perspective.

Not all questions types are appropriate for mobile surveys. Over-complicated question types, like elaborate matrix questions with detailed answer scales, are a big challenge for smartphone screens.

In the mobile world, it is better to be concise than absolutely precise. You can shorten your questions simply with slight wording tweaks.

Example

Not-so-good

How often do you purchase meals at restaurants?

Please only include food bought for sit down meals.

Select one option only.

- Once a week or more often
- At least once a month but less often than once a week
- Less than once a month
- Never

Better

How often do you eat at restaurants?

- At least weekly
- At least monthly
- Less often
- Never

As much as possible, try not to overwhelm respondents with too many answer options. If you have a long list of answer options, try to break it down into thematic blocks to make it easy for the respondent to find the right answer choice.

Example

Not-so-good

Which of these people live at your home?

- Partner / spouse
- Children ages 0-5
- Children ages 6-10
- Children ages 10-15
- Children ages 16 and older
- Parents
- Siblings
- Grandparents
- Aunts / uncles
- Cousins
- Other
- None of the above

Better

Which of these people live at your home?

- Partner / spouse
- Children
- Parents
- Siblings
- Extended family
- Other
- None of the above

From there, you can go into more specific options. Say for example you chose "Children" you'll be able to see this...

How old are the children living with you?

- 0-5 years old
- 6-10 years old
- 10-15 years old
- 16 years and older

Think like a user and avoid jargon

It's easier for people to express what factors or criteria are important than to consider a long list of feature options, many of which they may not understand.

Example

Not-so-good

Thinking back to when you acquired your TV, which of the following features or attributes were important in your purchase decision?

Please select one answer

- a. 240Hz-600Hz refresh rate
- b. 60-inch display
- c. 4k resolution
- d. VGA
- e. HDMI
- f. TruMotion
- g. Remote with RF and smartphone control
- h. Micro Dimming Pro
- i. MR 120
- j. None of the above

Better

When you bought your TV, which of the following were important in your purchase decision?

- a. Picture
- b. Screen size
- c. Video connections
- d. Accessories
- e. None of the above

Use question-specific scale constructs

Try to avoid agreement scales. Respondents find them harder to answer and more confusing than question-specific scales. It might not be practical to always avoid agreement scales, but their use should be minimized.

Example

Not-so-good

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am generally a happy person

- a. Agree strongly
- b. Agree somewhat
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree somewhat
- e. Disagree strongly

Better

Are you happy...?

- a. All the time
- b. Most of the time
- c. Some of the time
- d. Rarely
- e. Never

Bonus tip: Psychologically, people find unipolar scales (e.g. 'all the time' to 'never') easier to answer than bipolar scales (e.g. 'agree' to 'disagree').

Prioritize ease of answering over perfect balance

You may want to use negative statements for balance, but they may actually cause respondents to be tired and make mistakes.

Example

Not-so-good

Which of these do you associate with Brand X?

- High quality
- Not innovative
- A leader
- Expensive
- Not worth the money

Better

Which of these do you associate with Brand X?

- High quality
- Innovative
- A leader
- Expensive
- Worth the money

Review answer choices carefully

Make sure your single response answer options are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. What you especially don't want is to force the respondent to tick something that's not true, or not be able to tick any of the options.

Example

Not-so-good

When have you made your first purchase online?

- 1 year ago
- 1 to 3 years ago
- 3 to 5 years ago
- 5 to 10 years ago
- More than 10 years ago

Better

When have you made your first purchase online?

- I have never bought online
- Less than 12 months ago
- Less than 3 years ago
- Less than 5 years ago
- 5 to 10 years ago
- More than 10 years ago

Respondents who have made their first purchase online 1, 3, or 5 years ago may be confused about which answer option to choose. Also what do you answer if you've never bought anything online?

Keep it relevant

Use qualifying questions to avoid asking respondents to answer on irrelevant topics. Note the previous example could have been further improved by first asking if the respondent had ever bought online.

Example

Not-so-good

Which type of car do you prefer to drive?

- Manual
- Automatic

This question is only relevant for respondents who drive

Better

Ask a qualifying question first:

Do you drive a car?

- Yes daily / almost daily
- Yes weekly / almost weekly
- Yes occasionally
- No, not these days, but I used to
- No, but I'm planning to learn in the next 12 months
- No, never

Watch out for double-barreled questions

Ideally, one question should only tackle one issue. Referring to two or more issues at a time may frustrate the respondent when he/she can only answer for one. This may then result in inaccuracies in your data.

Example

Not-so-good

Should the government spend less money on national defense and more on health?

- a. Yes
- b. No

This question touches on two issues, but only asks for one answer.

Better

Question one:

Compared to what is currently being spent on national defense, the government should...

- a. Spend more
- b. Spend the same
- c. Spend less
- d. Don't know

Question two:

Compared to what is currently being spent on health, the government should...

- e. Spend more
- f. Spend the same
- g. Spend less
- h. Don't know

Framing

The answers you get depend on how you ask your questions. You may be asking for the same thing, but different approaches to asking will yield different responses.

Examples:

1. What is your favorite cola brand?
2. What is your favorite soft drink?
3. Which do you prefer?
 - a. Coke
 - b. Pepsi
 - c. Dr. Pepper

Pros and Cons of “don’t know”

Pros

It helps you avoid forcing respondents with no opinion to pick an answer they don’t believe.

Cons

It may be an easy way out to avoid thinking and move on through the survey. You may also lose people with tentative opinions.

Example:

How likely are you to buy a car in the next 12 months?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not very likely
- Not at all likely
- Don’t know

Other options:

- Screen for familiarity with the issue first and then ask for the respondent's opinion.
- You can also add a neutral statement for respondents who don’t have a strong opinion regarding the issue. See example below.

Example:

How do you feel about the government’s policy on immigration?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neutral
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative
- Don’t know enough to say

Leading questions

It's all too easy to accidentally introduce your opinions in questions. Try to find neutral language that doesn't imply any particular point-of-view.

Example

Not-so-good

Do you agree that the EU has failed in tackling the refugee crisis?

- Yes
- No

This question makes an opinion (EU has failed in tackling the refugee crisis) seem like a fact and subtly asks the respondent to react to it.

Better

Do you believe the EU's management of the refugee crisis was good or bad?

- Very good
- Good
- Neither good or bad
- Bad
- Very bad

Summary

Here are the key issues we have touched on:

- Keep questions and answer options short and sweet.
- Think like a user and avoid jargon.
- Use question-specific scale constructs.
- Prioritize ease of answering over perfect balance.
- Review answer choices carefully.
- Keep it relevant.
- Watch out for double-barreled questions and tackle one issue at a time.
- The answers you will get depend on how you ask questions.
- Consider the pros and cons of using "don't know" as an answer option.
- Avoid leading questions.

That's it. Thanks for your time! If you have questions about these survey-writing tips, feel free to reach out to us via contact@daliaresearch.com.

To see the question examples in a live survey format, click [here](#). Have fun!

Further Reading:

General survey-writing tips

Bradburn, N.M., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions: The definitive guide to questionnaire designs – for market research, political polls, and social and health questionnaires*. CA: Josey-Bass: A Wiley Imprint.

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Disadvantages of negative statements in surveys

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