IOWA

Division of Student Life

GUIDE ON WRITING SURVEY QUESTIONS

Effective surveys rely on clear and intentional questions that accurately capture respondents' experiences and perspectives. This guide provides practical strategies for developing high-quality survey questions within contexts such as assessing program impact, measuring satisfaction, or identifying learning outcomes. Key principles of question design, response option development, question order, and pre-testing will be highlighted.

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Understanding How Respondents Answer Questions

Respondents go through several mental steps when answering a question, and each step introduces the potential for error.

- **Comprehension:** Understanding what is being asked
- **Retrieval and Judgment:** Recalling relevant experiences and evaluating them
- **Response:** Selecting or forming an answer

Example:

Question: "In the last week, how many times did you attend a campus event?"
Respondents must:

- Define what counts as a "campus event"
- Define what "last week" means (last 7 days, Monday through Sunday, etc.)
- Choose a fitting response

Ambiguous wording increases effort and potential error.

Step 1: Identify What You Want to Know

Begin by clearly defining the information your survey needs to collect.

- Align each question with the survey's overall goals and learning outcomes
- Avoid collecting "nice-to-know" data that doesn't serve an actionable purpose

Example:

At the Student Organization Fair, the goal is to learn whether attendees discovered new campus organizations. Nice to know information may be whether students have joined student organizations prior to attending the fair, or if students have attended previous fairs.

Step 2: Write Clear, Focused Questions

All questions should:

- Be easy to interpret
- Apply to all respondents
- Ask about one concept per question
- Clearly define timeframes and terms
- Use language appropriate for your audience
- Avoid double negatives and contractions
- Spell out acronyms
- Write in full, complete sentences

Example:

Needs revision: "How helpful and informative was the fair?"

This asks two things (helpfulness and informativeness).

Improved, more specific version: "How informative was the Student Organization Fair?"

This specifies the type of fair and only asks about informativeness, enhancing overall clarity.

Step 3: Choose the Right Response Options

Well-designed response options ensure data accuracy and usability.

Closed-Ended Questions

- Use when you want quantifiable data
- Make choices mutually exclusive (no overlap) and exhaustive (cover all possibilities)
- Match the response scale to the question's content

Open-Ended Questions

- Use when exploring new topics or gathering qualitative insights
- Keep them brief and purposeful

Example:

Close ended:
"How many new student organizations did you learn about at the fair?"

- None
- 1–2
- 3–4
- 5 or more

Open ended:
"What new student organization are you most likely to engage with after attending the fair?"

Step 4: Use Scales Carefully

All scales should:

- Use consistent wording (all positive or all negative)
- Have clearly labeled response options

Likert scales:

- Use when you need to measure agreement with a statement
- Likert scales can increase cognitive load and be misunderstood
- Bipolar agreement scales (disagree to agree) can be harder to interpret than unipolar scales (not at all to extremely)

Unipolar scales:

- Useful when measuring intensity of a single construct
- Use a clear low-to-high progression
- Avoid mixing positive and negative directions in one scale

Example:

Likert Scale:

Please rate your agreement with the following statement:
"The Student Engagement Fair environment was welcoming."

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

If a respondent thinks the fair was not welcoming, they must choose one of the "disagree" options, which makes interpretation more difficult and indirectly measures agreement.

Unipolar Scale:

"How welcoming was the Student Engagement Fair environment?"

- Not welcoming at all
- Slightly welcoming
- Somewhat welcoming
- Very welcoming
- Extremely welcoming

Here, respondents can directly express their experience without trying to align with an agreement statement. This reduces cognitive load and allows clearer data collection.

Step 5: Order Questions Thoughtfully

The sequence of questions affects how respondents think and respond.

- Start with an engaging, relevant question
- Group related questions together
- Ask questions in chronological or logical order
- Place sensitive or demographic questions at the end

Example:

1. What motivated you to attend the Student Organization Fair?
2. How informative was the Student Organization Fair?
3. How welcoming was the Student Organization Fair environment?

4. How likely are you to attend again next year?
5. What is your current year at the University of Iowa?

Step 6: Pre-Test Your Survey

Testing helps identify unclear or biased questions before launch.

Best Practices:

- **Focus Groups:** Explore general understanding and terminology
- **Expert Review:** Seek feedback from peers, content experts, and assessment professionals
- **Cognitive Interviews:** Ask respondents to think aloud as they answer questions
  - Here is a useful video resource on how to conduct cognitive interviews: **Cognitive Interviews YouTube Video by the National Centre of Research Methods**
- **AI Tools:** Identify wording issues quickly

Example:
Conduct a short focus group with student organization leaders to test wording clarity for the Student Organization Fair survey.

Final Check: Before Sending Your Survey

Use this checklist before distributing your survey:

- ✔ Each question measures one concept
- ✔ Response options are clear, exhaustive, and exclusive
- ✔ Language matches the audience
- ✔ Questions are logically ordered
- ✔ Survey has been pre-tested