

## Common Mistakes in Writing Surveys

Material taken from "Survey Questions 101" on Qualtrics.com

### Mistake #1: Failing to Avoid Leading Words/Questions

Subtle wording differences can produce great differences in results:

- Non-specific words and ideas can cause a certain level of confusing ambiguity in your survey. "Could," "should," and "might" all sound about the same, but may produce a 20% difference in agreement to a question.
- Strong words such as "force" and "prohibit" represent control or action and can bias your results.

*Example: The government should force you to pay higher taxes.*

*Example: How would you rate the career of legendary outfielder Joe Dimaggio?*

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### Mistake #2: Failing to Give Mutually Exclusive Choices

Multiple choice response options should be mutually exclusive so that respondents can make clear choices. Don't create ambiguity for respondents. Review your survey and identify ways respondents could get stuck with either too many or no single, correct answers to choose from.

*Example: What is your age?*

0–10

10–20

20–30

30–40

40+

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### Mistake #3: Not Asking Direct Questions

Questions that are vague and do not communicate your intent can limit the usefulness of your results. Make sure respondents know what you're asking.

*Example: What suggestions do you have for improving Tom's Tomato Juice?*

This question may be intended to obtain suggestions about improving taste, but respondents will offer suggestions about texture, the type of can or bottle, about mixing juices, or even suggestions relating to using tomato juice as a mixer or in recipes.

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### Mistake #4: Forgetting to Add a "Prefer Not to Answer" Option

Sometimes respondents may not want you to collect certain types of information or may not want to provide you with the types information requested.

Privacy is an important issue to most people.

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### Mistake #5: Failing to Cover All Possible Answer Choices

Do you have all of the options covered? If you are unsure, conduct a pretest using “Other (please specify)” as an option. If more than 10% of respondents (in a pretest or otherwise) select “other,” you are probably missing an answer.

*Example: You indicated that you eat at Joe’s fast food once every 3 months. Why don’t you eat at Joe’s more often?*

*There isn’t a location near my house*

*I don’t like the taste of the food*

*Never heard of it*

This question doesn’t include other options, such as healthiness of the food, price/value or some “other” reason. Over 10% of respondents would probably have a problem answering this question.

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### **Mistake #6: Not Using Unbalanced Scales Carefully**

Unbalanced scales may be appropriate for some situations and promote bias in others.

For instance, a hospital might use an Excellent – Very Good – Good – Fair scale where “Fair” is the lowest customer satisfaction point because they believe “Fair” is absolutely unacceptable and requires correction.

The key is to correctly interpret your analysis of the scale. If “Fair” is the lowest point on a scale, then a result slightly better than fair is probably not a good one.

Set your bottom point as the worst possible situation and top point as the best possible, then evenly spread the labels for your scale points in-between.

*Example: What is your opinion of Crazy Justin’s auto-repair?*

*Pretty good*

*Great*

*Fantastic*

*Incredible*

*The Best Ever*

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### **Mistake #7: Not Asking Only One Question at a Time**

There is often a temptation to ask multiple questions at once. This can cause problems for respondents and influence their responses. Review each question and make sure it asks only one clear question.

*Example: What is the fastest and most economical Internet service for you?*