

Designing Surveys to Achieve Policy Change

Designing your Survey

The process of designing a survey requires organization and thoughtful consideration of how best to select and present the questions so they will elicit the most useful responses.

Here are some general guidelines for putting your survey together:

- If your survey is in a written format, include a cover letter with a short introduction that includes who you are and why you are doing the survey.
- Design the survey to fit the audience and the program or intervention.
- Avoid respondent frustration by allowing a “Don’t Know” or “Not Applicable”, “Other”, or “None” responses to questions, where appropriate.
- Do not combine two questions into one – a double-barreled question.
- Order the questions in such a way that it encourages people to complete the survey. Start with non-threatening information such as demographic data.
- Use simple language, and avoid technical terms and acronyms – avoid public health jargon.
- Avoid emotionally charged words or leading questions that point towards a certain answer.

Question types

There are several different types of questions you can use in your survey. This table shows the kinds of questions that can be asked, when to use each, and an example.

Question Type	Example
Multiple choice	<p>In your opinion, where should cigarette smoking be allowed at the County Fair?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In all open spaces ○ In designated smoking areas ○ Nowhere on fair grounds ○ Not sure/Have no opinion
Numeric open end	<p>How many City Council meetings have you attended? _____</p>
Text open end	<p>In what ways can we eliminate or redefine the Tobacco Retail Shop exemption in such a way that it no longer allows smoking lounges?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
Rate scale	<p>On a scale where “10” means you have a great amount of interest and “1” means you have no interest at all, rate your interest in each of these content areas.</p> <p>___ Indoor ventilation</p> <p>___ The health effects of secondhand smoke</p> <p>___ Protecting children from secondhand smoke</p> <p>___ Economic benefits of going smoke-free</p> <p>___ Hookah lounge in the neighborhood</p>
Likert scale	<p>How much do you agree with the following statement?</p> <p>Cigarette companies deliberately advertise and promote cigarettes to encourage youth under 18 to smoke.</p> <p>Strongly agree</p> <p>Somewhat agree</p> <p>Somewhat disagree</p> <p>Strongly disagree</p> <p>No opinion*</p> <p>*New research suggests that offering “No opinion” instead of “Neither” is preferred due to differing interpretations of “Neither”.</p>

Writing questions

The most difficult part of creating a survey is crafting questions that elicit the best information possible to answer the questions you have identified. The way a question is phrased influences the answers you will get. It is important to keep questions simple and neutral.

The following is a list of tips for writing good questions and good and poor examples of each.

1. Keep it short and simple

Poor	What is the vocation of the parent earning the major part of the family income?
Good	What type of work does the head of your household do?

2. Avoid vagueness

Poor	Was the self-help material provided to you adequate?
Good	Did the brochure on Quitting Smoking provide the information you were seeking?

3. Avoid abbreviations

Poor	Did the CIA information we provided influence your decision?
Good	Did the information on Clean Indoor Air influence your decision to adopt a smoke-free workplace policy?

4. Avoid negatives and double negatives

Poor	How sure are you that you won't stop smoking?
Good	How sure are you that you will continue smoking?

5. Avoid bias in the question and in the answers

Poor	Your child's school is one of the first schools in Oregon to adopt the Smoke-free Environment Policy as recommended by the State of Education. Do you support that policy?
Good	Do you support the Smoke-free Environment Policy adopted by your child's school?

6. Avoid objectionable items

Poor	Why did you fail to inform your parents that you started smoking?
Good	What are some reasons you did not tell your parents you started smoking?

7. Have only one concept per question or response

Poor	How many times per week do you smoke or drink?
Good	How many times per week do you engage in the following activities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Smoke a cigarette — Use smokeless tobacco — Drink beer — Drink wine — Drink spirits

8. Make sure the answer categories match the question

Poor	How much did the visit by program personnel influence you to vote for the smoke-free legislation? Answers: Never, Seldom, Sometimes, Usually, Always
Good	The visit by program personnel influenced me to vote for the smoke-free legislation. Answers: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

9. Response categories should not overlap (i.e., should be mutually exclusive)

Poor	How many times were you visited by program personnel? Answers: None, 1-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15 or more
Good	How many times were you visited by program personnel? Answers: None, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16 or more

10. Response categories should include all choices (i.e., should be exhaustive)

Poor	How many times were you visited by program personnel? Answers: Less than 5, 6-10, 11-15 (Note that there are no choices for those who were visited exactly 5 times, or more than 15 times)
Good	How many times were you visited by program personnel? Answers: Less than 5, 5-10, 11-15, 16 or more

Questions in different formats

Consider the format that your question will be received. Will it be read or heard? Is it a phone or internet survey? Here is the same question written for two different formats.

Spoken/heard— phone survey	<p>Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: It is okay for landlords to prohibit smoking in their tenants’ home if that is necessary to keep secondhand smoke out of other tenants’ homes. Agree or disagree? Strongly or somewhat?</p> <p>1 Strongly agree 2 Somewhat agree 3 No opinion [DO NOT READ] 4 Somewhat disagree 5 Strongly disagree</p> <p>7 Don’t know/Not sure [DO NOT READ] 9 Refused [DO NOT READ]</p> <p>(Interviewer Note: When reading, codes 4 & 5 are switched.)</p>
Read—written survey	<p>Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: It is okay for landlords to prohibit smoking in their tenants’ home if that is necessary to keep secondhand smoke out of other tenants’ homes.</p> <p>1 Strongly agree 2 Somewhat agree 3 Somewhat disagree 4 Strongly disagree 5 No opinion</p> <p>(Notice that we do not include “don’t know” or “Refused” on a written survey.)</p>