

Data Collection Tips: Developing a Survey

This document presents an overview of some common issues that nonprofits face when constructing a survey. While there are certainly different ways to structure and administer a survey, these issues apply across all types of surveys. Veterans and newcomers to evaluation can all benefit from keeping these tips in mind.

- **Ask only for the information that you need.**
When you begin to create data collection instruments, it's tempting to ask for information that you would like to know, or that you think would be interesting. Remember: You want to limit your questions to what you **need** to know. Here's one situation where a logic model and evaluation plan comes in handy: with an evaluation plan in front of you, you can be sure that each item in your survey is justified.
- **Consider a survey's length in terms of time, not pages.**
One of the core principles of sound evaluation practice is respect for those who are providing information. Their time is valuable, just like yours. Sometimes we confuse the page-length of a survey with how long it takes to fill out. Use common sense—it's rare that it's necessary to administer a 5-page survey. Time how long the survey will take, and know your audience: how much time do you think they'll give you? How much time would you give, if someone asked you to take a survey?
- **Pay attention to how the survey is formatted.**
Often it's necessary to spread questions out, in order to leave room for answers and to make your survey more attractive and easy to read. We've all seen surveys that have a lot of questions crowded together, in an effort not to spill onto another page. While we're all for saving paper, when it comes to surveys we've learned it's best to err on the side of visual appeal and ease of completion. Test your survey yourself: do you have enough room to fill in your answers? Are the questions easy to read, or are they squashed together?



- **Use appropriate language.**

Keep the reading level appropriate for the people who will be filling out the survey. (Some survey researchers suggest keeping the reading level slightly **below** what you think is the average reading level of those who will fill out the survey.) Also, try to use expressions and terminology that are commonly understood by the population you are serving. Avoid abbreviations or jargon—remember, there are probably terms and abbreviations that are used in your profession that a typical person would not understand. Here’s an example of how to make your survey language appropriate for parents of children in an after-school program:

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
Please indicate the extent to which you think the after school sports program increased your child’s ability to socialize with his or her peers.	Has participating in the after school sports program helped your child get along with other children?

- **Make sure you give culturally appropriate options in your answer choices.**

When addressing the issue of cultural appropriateness, people most often people think about race and ethnicity. Other important demographics to consider are rural vs. urban, religion, income level, and geographic region.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
Please tell us how you are related to the children in our program. <input type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Guardian	Please tell us your relationship to the child in our program. <input type="checkbox"/> Parent <input type="checkbox"/> Foster parent <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparent <input type="checkbox"/> Other relative <input type="checkbox"/> Other:



- **Check your assumptions.**

Sometimes we unintentionally ask a question that assumes that the respondent has certain experiences.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
<p>How many computers do you have at home?</p> <p>What kind of Christmas tree do you have?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Live</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Artificial</p>	<p>Do you have a home computer?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, how many computers are in your home?</p> <p><i>This question makes several assumption, including that your survey respondent celebrates Christmas (and is therefore probably Christian), but celebrates Christmas with a particular cultural tradition.</i></p>

- **Avoid biased questions.**

This can be the biggest challenge in developing a survey. Questions should not lead a person to answer in a particular way. We all need to examine our questions to be sure that we are not communicating that a particular answer is the “accepted” or “better” one, and we should try to have answer choices that account for a broad range of experience and opinion.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
<p>Is your child taking Honors English?*</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p>Check the box next to the English class your child is currently enrolled in.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> On-level English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> English for Speakers of Other Languages</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Honors English</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Special education</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>

* This question is from a survey of parents by a PTA at a local middle school. Members of the committee that developed the survey had children in Honors English.



NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
How would you rate our training overall? <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Very good <input type="checkbox"/> Good	How would you rate our training overall? <input type="checkbox"/> Unsatisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> OK <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent

- Ask questions one at a time (avoid merging two questions together).**
 The “Needs Work” examples below are referred to as “double barreled” questions, and we should avoid them.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER			
On average, how often do you read to your child (or children) and help with homework? Indicate your level of satisfaction with the hotel and the meals	On average, how often do you read to your child(ren) at home? On average, how often do you help your child(ren) with homework? Indicate your level of satisfaction with the following:			
	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
	Hotel accommodations	Meals	Travel arrangements	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



- **If you want respondents to select one answer from a list, make sure the options you give for answers are mutually exclusive.**

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
What did you do immediately after graduating high school? <input type="checkbox"/> Worked <input type="checkbox"/> Went to school <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteered	Which of the following did you do immediately after graduating high school? <input type="checkbox"/> Worked full time <input type="checkbox"/> Attended college full time <input type="checkbox"/> Attended college part time <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

- **Steer clear of objectionable questions.**

Think about whether the person answering will be able to comfortably answer the question—and be honest! There is usually a way to find out what you need to know in a way that is comfortable for the person answering.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
Have you ever been in prison? Has your child ever been arrested?	<i>Questions like this would only be appropriate if your program was specifically related to this topic, e.g., a program that worked with children of incarcerated parents.</i>



- **Consider whether people have enough information to answer the question.**

Do the people answering the question know enough to answer? Do they have enough information? Sometimes we ask people about subjects they don't know enough about, or phrase questions in a way that's too broad for people to be able to give a focused answer.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER
<p>Have you been satisfied with the feedback you've received from your children's teachers?</p> <p>Do you believe school bus drivers receive adequate training?</p>	<p>Indicate your level of satisfaction with the quality of the feedback you've received from your child's teacher <u>this school year</u>.</p> <p><i>This is probably not an appropriate question to ask parents. Most parents would not have enough information to provide an opinion that would be valuable.</i></p>

- **Make sure your questions are specific.**

Questions that are too general are difficult for people to answer accurately, and will not give you information you can use to improve your work.

NEEDS WORK	MUCH BETTER																							
<p>Did you like our material?</p>	<p>Please rate our handouts on the following:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="1013 1318 1393 1560"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Poor</th> <th>OK</th> <th>Good</th> <th>Excellent</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Content</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Organization</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Format—ease of reading</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>					Poor	OK	Good	Excellent	Content	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Format—ease of reading	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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We hope you found this document useful and informative.

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