

A blurred background image of a modern office environment. In the foreground, two women are seated at a table, looking at a laptop. One woman, with dark hair and wearing a teal top, is resting her chin on her hand. The other woman, with curly hair and wearing a grey sweater, is pointing at the laptop screen. In the background, several other business professionals in suits are standing and talking, creating a busy office atmosphere.

5 survey-writing mistakes you didn't even know you were making

There's a lot of power in the wording of a survey question.

Even if you know exactly what question you want to ask respondents, the way in which you ask them the question can completely change their answer and potentially alter your data.

It's surprisingly easy to unintentionally influence respondents or leave them confused about which answer choice actually applies to them.

A well-written survey question is clear and it doesn't pull the respondent to one side or another.

It's a subtle art and an actual science, but anyone can do it. Just don't fall into these 5 common traps.

1. Don't write leading questions

Leading questions are questions that contain wording that might sway respondents to one side of an argument. It may seem like obvious advice to avoid these, but questions like these can be harder to catch than you might think.

So how do you know when you're unintentionally writing a leading question?

Check to see if your question contains non-neutral wording.

✘ How short was Napoleon?

By using the word "short," you're suggesting to the respondent what the answer might be, which can influence how they answer the question. If you rewrite the question to use neutral language, you can eliminate bias in the question.

✘ Should concerned parents use infant car seats?

Specifying "concerned parents" is an unnecessary detail when the intention is to know whether car seats should be used (plus, "concerned" is non-neutral!). It draws attention away from the actual topic, which is the use of infant car seats.

✔ How would you describe Napoleon's height?

With neutral wording, this question is a lot more well, neutral, and that's a great thing for your survey data. That was an easy one, but leading questions can be a lot more subtle than that.

✔ Do you think special car seats should be required for infant passengers?

With the wording in this question, we minimize the emotional wording and we stay on topic. Often these types of questions arise when the survey writer has the best of intentions, like when they're trying too hard to be thorough. **It's always best to include only what's necessary in the question.**

2. Avoid loaded questions

What's the difference between a leading question and a loaded question? A loaded question forces the respondent to answer in a way that doesn't actually reflect their opinion or situation. Clearly, including questions like these will damage the quality of your data.

✘ Where do you enjoy drinking beer?

Unless the question that came immediately before this was "do you drink beer?", this would be a loaded question. The question forces the respondent to state that they drink beer, even if they don't like beer—or if they hate alcohol altogether!

✔ Do you drink beer?

Yes

..... No

Where do you like to drink beer?

..... What's your favorite beverage?

Remember it's always a good idea to pretest your survey to make sure that no questions assume something is true without asking first.

Then, you can set up a preliminary question and use skip logic to let people who don't drink beer pass the question.

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3. Stay away from double-barreled questions

Some survey questions are actually two questions that only look like they're just one. It's impossible to get accurate data from double-barreled questions because respondents only have the answer options to respond to one question, not both.

✘ How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the pay and work benefits at your job?

Some respondents will answer this question with their pay in mind, while others will answer with work benefits in mind. In other words, the data you get back will be unreliable because you can't even be sure respondents are answering the same question.

✘ How useful would this textbook be for students and young professionals in the field?

Don't forget that double-barreled questions also apply to the object of survey questions, not just their subjects. Now the respondent is forced to give a single answer for both parties.

✔ How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the pay at your job?

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the work benefits at your job?

When you encounter a double-barreled question, it's always best to break it up into two questions. **Survey questions should always be written in a way that only one subject is being measured.**

✔ How useful would this textbook be for students?
How useful would this textbook be for young professionals?

Instead break the question into two; one measuring usefulness for students and one measuring usefulness for professionals.

4. Absolutely do not use absolutes

The trouble with absolutes is that they're inflexible—far too inflexible to use in surveys. They force respondents into a corner where they can't provide useful information. These questions often only provide yes/no answer options and usually include words like “always,” “all,” “every,” and “ever.”

✘ Do you always eat breakfast?

Yes

No

If every respondent took this question literally, the answer would almost always be “no.” But even if they didn't, the information you'd get back wouldn't be very useful. They can't provide any useful details about how often they eat breakfast—they either do or they don't.

✔ How many days a week do you normally eat breakfast?

Every day

5-6 days

3-4 days

1-2 days

I usually don't eat breakfast

Giving respondents a variety of options allows them a chance to answer the question in a more nuanced way and provide better, more specific data in the process.

5. Be clear

It's always best to use clear, concise, uncomplicated language in your survey. That means it's best to avoid acronyms, jargon, or technical terms.

Make sure to provide definitions or examples if you need to include acronyms, tricky terms, or complex concepts. That way, you can be certain that almost anybody can answer your questions easily, and that they'll be more inclined to complete your survey. Of course, you've got to know your audience. Some sample groups are experts in the subject your survey is about and can answer more complicated questions.

For example, if you're surveying patients in a hospital, you'll want to avoid using medical jargon. However, if your survey sample is made up of doctors, it makes sense to ask more specialized questions and use higher level medical vocabulary.

❌ **What was the state of cleanliness of the room?**

❌ **Do you own a tablet PC?**

✅ **How clean was the room?**

✅ **Do you own a tablet PC? (i.e. iPad, Android tablet)**

Writing clear, objective and focused survey questions is easy—just follow the survey-writing best practices laid out in this guide.

Remember:

Check for non-neutral wording.

Include only what's necessary in your question.

Pretest your survey to make sure there are no assumptions in your questions.

Always write questions in a way that only one value is being measured.

Stay away from absolutes and give respondents a variety of options to choose from.

Use clear, concise, uncomplicated language in your questions.

Keeping these rules in mind while writing your survey will give you more accurate data, and give your respondents a much improved survey-taking experience.

Create your first survey today

Get started