



# How to: Write an effective survey

## Before you begin...

### Consider the pros and cons of surveys.

Surveys are **realistic** to produce, as survey-making tools are widely available and often low-cost or **free**. They also have the potential to collect large amounts of data! But...

**Hardly anyone wants to take a survey** without an incentive. Those who respond to surveys often do so because they have a strong opinion, leaving the neutral population unheard. There is also a possibility of **inaccurate answers** due to participants' lack of effort or desire to seem a certain way.

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### Consider why you're making the survey.

Sharing a survey **before** a project's completion can answer questions like the following:

- How can I best make my project appeal to my audience?
- Does my audience prefer X or Y?
- How can I best engage my audience?

Sharing a survey **after** a project has been launched can answer questions like these:

- How well did I achieve my project's objective?
- What did people learn from my project?
- Which elements of my project performed well or poorly?

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### Consider ethical standards. Be sure to:

- Get informed consent
- Be clear that participation is voluntary
- Allow participants to withdraw at any point
- Give details on the survey's purpose
- Do not deceive, mislead, influence, harm, or falsify data
- Uphold respect, honesty, and confidentiality and avoid bias
- **Be as transparent as possible!**



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## Writing the survey

### 5 parts of a survey

1. Consent form, involving contact info, option to withdraw, purpose of study, and indication of consent
2. Introduction that describes the survey's format
3. Main body questions addressing research concerns
4. Demographic information if desired
5. Concluding statement/thank-you note

**Explain why the participant's response is important to your study.** This can encourage people to be honest and detailed when completing your survey. Including a thank-you message shows the participant that their time really did mean something.

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### Best practices

- Develop **clear research objectives**
- Make sure all of the questions relate to at least one research objective
- Be clear and **concise**
- Uphold strong ethical standards

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### ...and worst practices

- Asking leading questions (ex: Don't you think...)
- Using jargon or terminology inappropriate to a broad audience
- Asking questions or providing answer choices evoking bias (ex: How *great* was your experience with...)
- Assuming the consumer thinks a certain way
- Making the consumer feel dumb by patronizing or confusing them
- Using absolutes like "always" and "never"
- Asking unclear questions
- Asking more than one question at a time



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## Question examples

### Bad

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***What is your favorite method of bioremediation? Explain why.***

Unless this question was given specifically to people who are educated on bioremediation, it would be hard to answer.

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***Do you think it's OK to pick your nose?***

This question is sensitive and influenced by social desirability, so it's unlikely that all participants will answer it honestly.

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***Did you find this page on how to write a survey not unhelpful, or was it helpful?***

It's hard to tell how to answer this question, which can be frustrating.

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***Are you always a good person? Yes or no.***

It isn't fair to ask participants to group themselves into such absolute categories. It's rare that a participant identifies as "always" being a certain way.

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***What is your experience with California Betty's new surf wax and when did you use it?***

This question asks about both the product itself and an element of consumer behavior. This question takes more effort to answer and should be separated.

### Good

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***What do you think might be an effective way to clean pollution naturally?***

Although this question addresses bioremediation, it is put into terms more appropriate for a broad audience.

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***What are the effects of picking your nose?***

This question does not ask the participant to decide whether or not an action with questionable social desirability is acceptable.

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***Did you find this page on how to write a survey helpful?***

This question is more clear and easy to answer.

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***What qualities would you expect to see in a "good" person?***

This question does not define the category as an absolute.

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***a) About how long ago did you use California Betty's new surf wax?  
b) How was your overall experience?***

These questions ask about one variable at a time and are easier to answer.