

## **Guidelines for Constructing Academic Surveys**



Surveys can be useful tools in gathering information about a particular topic, but asking appropriate questions is essential. This pamphlet includes information to help you construct a meaningful survey.

**To create and administer a successful survey, consider the following:**

- Familiarize yourself with and follow the Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research in the Belmont Report. This can be found at <http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html>
- Have a goal before you begin. Make sure you know exactly what you want to learn from your survey results—avoid asking unnecessary questions and not asking enough essential questions.
- Determine your target group.
- Decide which method to use (face-to-face, web, phone, mail, etc.).
- Begin your survey with a paragraph or two of introduction. Thank the participant, mention your purpose, indicate how long the survey will take, and review your confidentiality policy.
- Choose the proper format for your questions (multiple choice, yes/no, open-ended, etc.).
- Revise and edit as necessary. Be sure all directions and questions are clear and look for unnecessary questions by asking yourself, “How am I going to use this information?” If you do not have a use for the information, either delete the question or revise it so it suits your needs.
- Always pretest your survey before distributing it. (Also consider asking a few others to pretest it for you.)

**When constructing the survey:**

- Write clear directions for each section/question.
- Ask enough questions to cover the topic thoroughly.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Avoid leading questions.
- Do not make assumptions in your directions or questions.
- Delete all bias from questions.
- Make questions complete and specific—avoid vague terms and words that can mean different things to different people (rarely, most, sometimes, etc.).
- Write your questions clearly so that everyone can understand.
- Put easier questions first.
- Complete one topic before moving on to the next.
- Ask questions in a logical order.
- Use transitions to help your questions and sections flow.
- For sensitive topics, always include the option “prefer not to answer.”

## **Questions should provide accurate measurements based on your needs.**

Consider the following questions:

- “What is the most important problem students face at BTC?”
- “Which of the following problems is most important to BTC students?”

Both questions could be used in a survey, but you will likely obtain different results. The first question is open-ended, so you may receive several answers. The second question, however, would provide participants with a list of choices, so you could survey their opinions on a set list of issues.

## **Questions should be worded clearly and precisely.**

Notice the difference between these two questions:

- “Sometimes, I am unable to express how interested in politics I am.”
- “I am usually uninterested in politics.”

The first question is confusing—are the participants being asked about their ability to express their interest, or are they being asked if they are interested in politics? The second question is much clearer.

## **Considerations for Specific Question Types:**

### **Multiple choice**

- Choices must include all possible answers.
- Be sure the choices do not overlap (there can be only one correct answer).
- Avoid providing more than 5-6 choices (if more are necessary, consider using an open-ended question).
- For each question, list the most positive choice first.

### **Yes/No questions**

- Be sure that yes/no are the only possible answers.

### **Rankings**

- Be specific; explain your terms—for example, if asking to rank best to worst, what do you mean by best and worst?

### **Open-ended questions**

- Work best if they follow up closed-ended questions, and ask “why” or “please explain.”

The following sources were consulted to create this pamphlet:

"AAPOR | Best Practices for Survey and Public Opinion Research."

*AAPOR | Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2010.

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*Zoomerang*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2010.

Fink, Dr. Arlene G.. *How to Ask Survey Questions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1995. Print.

\*Fink, Dr. Arlene G., and Dr. Jacqueline Kosecoff. *How To Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1998. Print.

Fowler, Floyd J.. *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1995. Print.

Fowler, Floyd J.. *Survey Research Methods*. Third Edition ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 2001. Print.

Likert, Rensis. *A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes*. New York: n.p., 1932. Print. *Archives of Psychology* 140.

\*Peterson, Robert A.. *Constructing Effective Questionnaires*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1999. Print.

\*Suskie, Linda A.. *Questionnaire Survey Research: What Works*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Assn. For Institutional Research, 1996. Print.

Walonick, David. "Questionnaires and Surveys - A Free Tutorial." *Survey Software - Crosstabs Software - Online and Paper Surveys*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2010.

\* Book is available in the Learning Commons. (The other books may be ordered through OhioLINK.)

