

Dillman's Principles for Writing Survey Questions

1 Choose simple over specialized words.

Use *tired* instead of *exhausted*.
Use *honest* instead of *candid*.

2 Choose as few words as possible to pose the question.

Very few people will read every word on a survey. Get rid of unnecessary words.

3 Use complete sentences to ask questions.

Use "What is your age?" instead of "Age:"

4 Avoid vague qualifiers when more precise estimates can be obtained.

You should be as specific as possible in what you are asking. Leaving room for interpretation may invalidate your data (i.e. what is the difference between *sometimes* and *occasionally*?)

5 Avoid specificity that exceeds the respondent's potential for having an accurate, ready-made answer.

For example, avoid making respondents make unnecessary calculations such as figuring out the percent of nights spent away from home that were for business purposes.

Another example of a **Don't**: *How many days have you worked this season were you were ill?*

6 Provide appropriate time referents.

- If you are asking something that happens **frequently**, the time span should be very short (i.e. *How many times did you brush your teeth a day?*)
- If you are asking about **novel events** that don't happen frequently, the time span can be longer (i.e. *In the past 3 years, how many car accidents did you get in?*)

7 Distinguish "Undecided" and "Not applicable" from "Neutral".

For responses on a scale, place "undecided" and "N/A" at the end of the scale to distinguish from "neutral".

8 Avoid double-barreled questions.

In other words, avoid questions that contain two different statements or questions to respond to (i.e. *What do you do in hot weather to stay healthy or make sure others stay healthy?*)

9 State both sides of attitudinal scale in the question stems.

Use: "To what extent do you *disagree* or *agree* that the new safety tools are useful?"

Instead of: "To what extent do you *agree* that the new safety tools are useful?"

10 Use cognitive techniques to improve recall.

Example of a **Do**: Please think about the location where your employer is most likely to display posters focused on safety. Please think about the last time you were at this place. Did you see any posters featuring the new safety gloves?

11 Develop response categories that are mutually exclusive.

In other words, ensure responses don't overlap.

Example of a **Don't**: Where did you hear about the coal mining accident?

- a.) On my way to work
- b.) On the radio
- c.) While at work
- d.) A coworker told me

12 Eliminate check-all-that-apply question formats to reduce primacy effects.

Respondents are often not motivated enough to read through a long list.

Instead, separate and place items on a scale. **For example**: "For each of the following tell us to what extent you disagree or agree."

13 Use equal numbers of positive and negative categories for scalar questions.

Provide balanced scales and categories that are evenly spaced conceptually. When people are neutral they are more likely to choose the middle response even if it is positive. Ensure you provide a genuine middle point.

Example of a **Don't**: *Would you say your health in general is ... excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?*

14 Soften the impact of potentially objectionable questions.

Avoid placing potentially objectionable questions at the beginning of a survey. For example, questions like, 'Have you been arrested?' will likely offend respondents early in the survey and bias other responses.

15 Avoid asking respondents to say yes in order to mean no.

In other words, avoid double negative phrasing (i.e. *Do you favor of oppose not allowing the state to raise taxes without approval of 60% of the voters?*)

16 Avoid bias from unequal comparisons.

Response options should be neutral and comparable.

Example of a **Don't**: Which one of the following do you feel is most responsible for the recent outbreaks of violence in America's schools?

- a.) Irresponsible parents
- b.) School policies
- c.) Television programs

17 Choose question wordings that allow comparisons to be made with previously collected data.

For example, benchmark items from other scales or surveys.