



How to create a survey

Surveys are a great way to collect data from a large number of stakeholders in a short amount of time. You can ask everyone the same question and speed up data analysis even further by giving them the same responses to choose from. You can learn demographic data about your users or stakeholders to better understand who is using your product. If your sample size is large enough, survey data will provide you with meaningful statistics about your product and its use that you can present to investors or use in marketing materials.

It is very easy to create bad surveys that will not provide you with any useful data. If your questions are poorly written, you could easily conduct a survey and end up with no helpful information about your product or your users.

This how-to guide will help you draft survey questions to give you the data you need.

What questions do you want to answer?

Before you even think about writing survey questions, you need to understand the overall purpose of your survey. Is it to:

- Learn more about who is using your product (your customers) so that you can better serve them?
- Learn more about how customers are experiencing your product or service?
- Understand the impact of your product or service on various user outcomes?
- Or something else entirely?

Write a few questions that you want your survey data to answer at the top of a paper or document. Keep these questions in mind as you write your survey questions. Each time you write a new survey question, look back at the questions at the top of the page and ask yourself:

Will this new question help me answer my overall research questions?

If the answer is no, you don't need that question!



Who are you asking the questions of?

The audience for your survey is your **sample**. The sample is a subset of the overall population you want to learn more about. If you want to learn more about your users or customers, for example, you could choose to survey

- All of your users
- All of your potential users (people who share certain characteristics with your idea user but aren't customers yet)
- The subset of your users who choose to respond to your survey

Before writing the survey questions, think about your sample, their lives, their time constraints, their level of education, their reading ability. All of these things will influence the likelihood of your respondents being able or willing to respond to your survey. For example, if respondents in your sample are

- Teachers, you don't want to send a survey to their school email address during the summer months when they are not checking it. However, you also don't want to survey them in September, or during exam periods when their schedules are likely to be very busy.
- Not fluent in the language of your survey, you need to make sure your questions are constructed simply, without complex vocabulary.
- Professionals or others who are busy or unlikely to respond to a survey, you might consider offering them an incentive that encourages response.

Writing survey questions

The first rule of writing survey questions is:

Don't write them if you don't have to!

If someone else has written – and tested – survey questions, they likely know their wording works. This could save you a lot of time and headache. At most, you'll have to edit questions to fit your audience or context, but it's a lot easier and less time-consuming to edit than to come up with new content from scratch.



What kinds of questions should I write?

Keep in mind the size of your sample when designing questions for your survey. The general rule here is:

The larger the size of the sample, the more structured and closed the survey questions need to be. The smaller the size of the sample, the more freedom you have to design open-ended questions or questions that require more writing.

These rules are also put in place to save you time in the data analysis phase. If you survey 1,000 individuals and you have 10 open-ended questions for which they can write individual responses, that's 10,000 written responses that you have to read, categorise and make sense of. Do you have time for that?

Common question types:

- **Closed questions** provide a range of responses from which respondents choose. They include:
 - **Dichotomous questions** require a yes/no or one/the other response.
 - **Multiple-choice questions** give respondents a list of options from which to choose one.
- **Scales** allow the respondent to select from categories (“not at all” to “quite a lot”) or select an order (“high” to “low”, “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”).
- **Open questions** allow respondents to type a response that is unique to them. These could require respondents to fill in a blank, type an answer, or they might be attached to the “Other” option in a multiple-choice question that asks “If you selected Other, please specify.”

Writing “good” survey questions

Your survey data are only as good as the questions you write. If you write ambiguous questions or questions that are actually multiple questions in one, you could end up with no data at all. Here are some pitfalls to avoid when writing survey questions.



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Complex terms and language	Big words can offend and confuse. If they're not necessary, don't use them!
Ambiguous questions	Seemingly simple questions such as "How big is your family?" or "Do you use drugs?" are ambiguous if there is no context provided. Families could be multi-generational or combined, and drugs could be illegal or prescription medication.
Double-barrelled questions	It's very easy to combine more than one issue in a questions that requires one response. For example, in the question, "Do you consider the President to be an honest and effective leader?" respondents may think effective, yes – but honest, no. How would they answer?
Hard to disagree with statements	These are statements where your respondent is likely to think 'yes that's true, but...' They are not, however, given a chance to elaborate and are forced to either agree or disagree. For example, 'The elderly are often a burden to society '
Leading questions	As the name states, these lead respondents towards a particular response, which can bias the data you collect, such as, "Do cold-blooded killers have a right to life?"
Recall dependent questions	These questions rely on memory, which creates more of a burden on respondents, who may just give up if it takes them too long to think about a response.
Offensive questions	If respondents take offence to a question or a series of questions, not only are they likely to skip those items, they may just throw out the entire survey. Offensive questions can be as simple as 'How old are you?' so be careful.
Questions with unwarranted assumptions	Respondents are likely to be at a loss when it comes to answering a question that contains an assumption they do not agree with. For example, the question 'What aspect of this course did you enjoy most?' assumes that the respondent enjoyed something.



The most important step: Piloting your survey

Before you release your survey to the world, it is essential to pilot it with more than one person. You pilot a survey to learn:

1. Are your survey instructions clear? Do respondents know how to respond to each question?
2. Does the order of your questions make sense? If you start asking questions about a person's childhood, then switch to present day and then back again, people get confused and you create unnecessary response burden.
3. Do your questions themselves make sense? Are the answers you're getting from respondents the answers you thought you'd get? If not, your questions may not be worded clearly.
4. Are there questions that are skipped more than others? There might be a reason for this.
5. Does your survey take too long to complete? If so, you might not get many respondents.

Once you have piloted the survey, make the necessary adjustments and then you can launch it with your sample.

Final thoughts

This is only a whistle-stop tour into the incredibly useful world of surveys. We hope that it provides you with guidance around the biggest pitfalls to avoid so that you can get useful data to help your business.

Reach Out

See our other data collection methods guides or our guide on Planning your Technology Pilot in the Learning area of the Breakthrough Labs community.