

Common Pitfalls to Good Survey Design

When writing your survey questions, there are a few common pitfalls that are also to avoid. This document will identify some of the most common errors to watch out for when creating an effective survey.

Keys to Success:

- Place difficult to answer, or sensitive, questions near the end of the survey, rather than near the beginning.
- Place the questions in a logical order, grouping topical questions together.
- Use consistent rating scales. If possible, use the same number of points for each response scale, and be consistent about what each value means.

Language

- **Pitfall:** Using acronyms, jargon or other terms that might not be familiar to all participants.
- **Solution:** Use language that is accessible to your survey population.
 - **Bad question:** How many hours a day do you spend in the JWC?
 - **Good question:** How many hours a day do you work out in the John Wooden Center?
- **Pitfall:** Using words which place a value judgment on behavior or lead the respondent.
- **Solution:** Use neutral wording, avoid leading statements.
 - **Bad question:** UCLA is the top university in the west. How much did you enjoy your campus visit?
 - **Good question:** Please indicate how you felt about your recent campus visit.
- **Pitfall:** Phrasing questions in ways that are confusing or unclear.
- **Solution:** Use simple, clear language.
 - **Bad question:** How often do you prohibit yourself from partaking of desserts?
 - **Good question:** How often do you eat dessert?

Question and Response Options

- **Pitfall:** Offering choices that overlap or are not exhaustive.
- **Solution:** Ensure multiple-choice answers are mutually-exclusive, and exhaustive. Provide a wide enough scale to allow individuals to reply more specifically.
 - **Bad:** 1) more than 6 hrs/wk, 2) more than 8 hrs/wk, 3) more than 10 hrs/wk.
 - **Bad:** 1) 6 hours or fewer, 2) 6-24 hours, 3) 25-48 hours.
 - **Good:** 1) 6 hours or fewer, 2) 7-12 hrs., 3) 13 – 18 hrs., 4) 19 hrs. or more.
 - Note: consistent ranges, mutually exclusive and exhaustive options
- **Pitfall:** Offering a scale that is unbalanced toward positive or negative experiences.
- **Solution:** Have an equal number of positive and negative responses.
 - **Bad:** 1) Very good, 2) Good, 3) Bad
 - **Good:** 1) Very good, 2) Good, 3) Average, 4) Bad, 5) Very Bad
- **Pitfall:** Asking double- or triple-barreled questions
- **Solution:** Ask only one question at a time (split the question into two or more items)
 - **Bad:** How satisfied are you with the programs and customer service we provide?
 - **Good:** How satisfied are you with the programs we provide?
How satisfied are you with the customer service we provide?