

# Writing Questions & Designing Survey Questionnaires

**Sara Kathleen Henry**

Director, UCSD Express to Success Programs

**Anthony Jakubisin**

Assistant Resident Dean, Sixth College

# Learning Outcomes

- By the end of this presentation, you will:
  - Be able to articulate the purpose for your survey and your main research question.
  - Know the different types of questions and how they are structured.
  - Have a better understanding of principles that guide question writing for surveys.
  - Learn what considerations to take into account when writing questions and designing surveys.



# Constructing a Survey Instrument

- Two Major Purposes for Surveys
  - Formal research
  - Informal inquiry
- Two Major Types of Surveys
  - Questionnaires (by paper, phone, by mail, technology/web-based)
  - Interviews (by phone or face-to-face)
- Three Key Considerations for Writing Questions
  - Determining the content, scope, and purpose
  - Choosing the response format for collecting information
  - Wording the question to get at the issue of interest

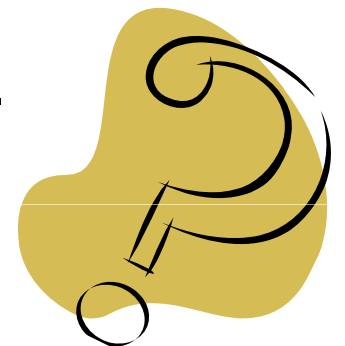


# Asking Survey Questions

- What is the purpose?
  - To determine students' level of satisfaction with Welcome Week programs and events.
- Have you identified a research question?
  - "Did students' knowledge of campus resources increase as a result of participation in Welcome Week?"
- How will you collect data and analyze/use the results?
  - Via *StudentVoice*, use results to improve programs
- What are resources for writing questions?
  - Inquire among content experts and in relevant literature
  - Ask colleagues with related interests for guidance – both at UC San Diego and at other campuses

# Asking Survey Questions

- What is the purpose of your assessment project?
- What is your research question?
- How will you collect data and analyze/use the results?
- Take a few minutes to draft a purpose statement, research question, and method for collecting data and using results.
- Share with a partner and give each other feedback.

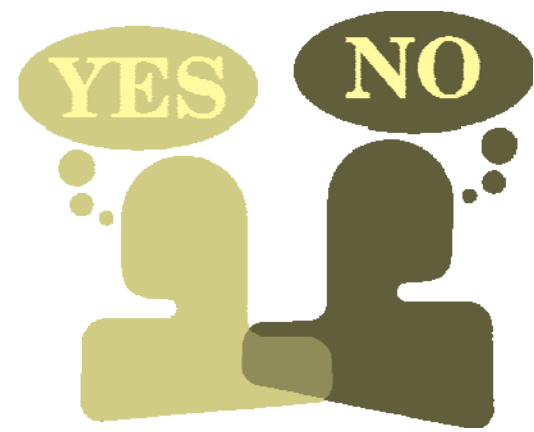


# Types of Questions

- Structured or fixed-response questions
  - Structured questions are questions that offer the respondent a closed set of responses from which to choose.
- Partially structured questions
  - You may have a partial list of answer choices, but may still have some doubt or uncertainty about other possible responses.
- Non-structured or open questions
  - Non-structured questions, or open-ended questions, are questions where there is no list of answer choices from which to choose. Respondents are simply asked to write their response to a question.

# Types of Questions

- Dichotomous Response Formats
  - Please enter your student status:
    - Undergraduate
    - Graduate
  - Do you believe UC San Diego students are satisfied with their social experience?
    - Yes
    - No



# Types of Questions

- Structured Questions Based on Level of Measurement

- *Ordinal Response Format*

Please rank the following UC San Diego social events from best to worst (1=best; 4=worst)

- Welcome Week
- Sun God
- Fall Fest
- Marshallpalooza

- *Interval Level Response Format*

Sun God contributes in positive ways to UC San Diego's social life.

(1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)

1            2            3            4            5



# Types of Questions

- Filter or Contingency Questions
  - Have you ever attended an event at the Loft?
    - Yes, I love the Loft!
    - No, because all I do is study!
  - If no, continued to Question #2. If yes, how many times did you attend an event in the past six months?
    - Once
    - 2-5 times
    - 6-10 times
    - 11-20 times
    - More than 20 times



# Types of Questions

- Partially-structured questions
  - What activities are you involved in outside of your academic coursework (check all that apply)?
    - Leadership development program
    - On- or off-campus internship or job
    - Study abroad
    - Community service
    - Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Unstructured or open-ended questions
  - Please comment on your overall experience at Transfer Orientation.

---

---

---

---

# Question Content

- Is the question necessary and/or useful?
  - “Does the question I ask address the research question(s)?”
- Are several questions needed?
  - “How would you rate your RA training experience and the food?”
- Does the question imply causation?
  - “Do you feel that the new format for RA training caused an increase in your knowledge of campus resources?”
- Is the question ambiguous and need to be more specific?
  - “How did RA training contribute to the development of your communication skills?”
- Is the question biased or loaded?
  - “Do you feel the hard-working and dedicated Resident Assistants should get priority registration for classes?”

# Question Content

- Does the question ask for secondhand information?
  - “How do you think your fellow Resident Assistants feel about their experience working as an RA?”
- What assumptions does the question make?
  - “Have you used services provided by Counseling & Psych Services?”
- Is the time frame specified?
  - “How has the Residential Life Staff contributed to your student experience?”
- Does the question contain hidden contingencies?
  - “How has your role as a Resident Advisor contributed to your Sixth College experience?”
- Is the question free of technical jargon or acronyms?
  - “Please rate your knowledge of the role of CSOs in residential living.”

# Questionnaire Design

- Clearly mark the beginning and end of survey.
- Instructions should be placed where they are needed.
- Order questions consecutively and from top to bottom, left to right.
- Use a consistent background and font type, color and size.
- Use large and bold font for questions.
- Use color shading to show groupings or to distinguish between questions.
- Use shading or spacing to show groupings by topic.

# A Checklist of Considerations

- Question Placement
  - Answers may be influenced by prior questions (aka, carryover effect).
  - Question placement may influence level of interest in responding.
  - Question may not receive sufficient attention from respondent.
- You Can Use the Following to Review Your Survey:
  - Start with easy, relevant, nonthreatening questions (sets the tone).
  - Put more difficult, threatening or sensitive questions near the end.
  - Leave open-ended questions until later in the survey.
  - Demographic questions should be asked last.
  - Ask about one topic at a time and organize accordingly.
  - When switching topics, use a transition statement.
  - Thank the respondent for their time.

# References

- Bourque, L., & Fielder, E. (1995). *How to conduct self-administered and mail surveys: Learning objectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Converse, J. M., & Presser, S. (1986). Survey questions: Handcrafting the standardized questionnaire. In *Qualitative Applications in the Social Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method*. New York: Wiley.
- Fink, A. (1995). *How to ask survey questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fowler, F. J., Jr. (1995). *Improving survey questions. Design and evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bradburn, N., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Writing Survey Questions

# Questions and Comments

**For more information, please contact us!**

Sara Henry at [sara@ucsd.edu](mailto:sara@ucsd.edu) or Tony Jakubisin at [ajakubisin@ucsd.edu](mailto:ajakubisin@ucsd.edu)