



## **Program Evaluation**

### **Mistakes in Survey Design and Item Writing – Quick Tips Guide**

As educators, it is generally best practice to inform learners of proper procedures, correct steps in performing skills, and positive exemplar behaviors—to specify and model that which is intended to be achieved, not that which is intended to be avoided. However, given the diversity of ways in which we could present surveys to respondents that yield substantive data to inform action planning and program improvement, it seems appropriate to instead identify a more finite list of common mistakes and associated examples. The following pages present these common mistakes and associated examples, but this list is not intended to be exhaustive. Additionally, note that some of the mistakes are problematic in all circumstances, whereas other mistakes are problematic in most, but not all, circumstances.

This resource also has two companion documents: “Survey of Mistakes – Find the Mistakes,” a hypothetical evaluation tool that was intentionally created by the School of Medicine’s Office of Assessment and Evaluation (OAE) to reflect common mistakes made when designing a survey, and to reflect the majority of mistakes listed in this document, and “Survey of Mistakes – Answer Key,” a document noting the common mistakes in the context of this particular hypothetical evaluation tool.

**OAE welcomes your feedback. If you wish to provide feedback related to this resource or to the two companion resources, please complete our [Feedback Form for Resources – Mistakes in Survey Design and Item Writing](#).**

## Overall Survey Design

Mistakes include designing surveys:

1. with unclear or incomplete introductions or instructions for completion (e.g., time for completion, contact information for questions or feedback, rationale for collecting identifiable or sensitive data, explanation of who will and will not have access to identifiable or sensitive data)
2. of an inappropriate length (i.e., usually too long)
3. that align with a dissemination method (e.g., paper survey vs online survey vs in-person interview) that is inappropriate for the intended respondents
4. that include unnecessary items or items that will not provide data to inform stakeholders, decision makers, or action planners
5. that include typographical, spelling, or grammatical errors, lack of cohesion among item phrasing in item series, formatting errors and inconsistencies, and errors in other areas related to general writing and proofreading skills
6. with an excessive number of open-ended items (i.e., then placing an undue burden on respondents, requiring resource-intensive qualitative data analysis, or resulting in unused data)
7. with language at a literacy level that is inappropriate for the intended respondents
8. that fail to present related items together or that are otherwise disorganized
9. that fail to identify the respondent in a way that allows responses to be matched across instrument and/or time of administration (e.g., pre-program and post-program surveys)

## Item Writing

Mistakes include writing items that:

1. ask respondents to provide information that could be obtained by other means (e.g., demographic and contact information)
2. ask respondents to rank order long lists of items (e.g., respondents might reliably rank their top three and bottom three choices)
3. present lists of elements (e.g., response options to be selected, items to be rated) in a biased or illogical order (i.e., consider alphabetical order or another logical, unbiased order)
4. include double-barreled<sup>+</sup> or compound items that measure more than one element
5. present response option lists that overlap, such that options are not mutually exclusive
6. present response option lists that are incomplete
7. provide insufficient response space for item completion
8. include ambiguous or unfamiliar terms in questions, stems, response options, scales, and so forth
9. relate to both “pre-program” and “post-program” beliefs, perspectives, attitudes, and so forth on the “post-program” survey, unless no “pre-program” administration is possible
10. fail to provide clear and complete instructions for specific item completion when necessary (e.g., rank three items, where 1 is the top/first choice and 3 is the bottom/last choice, and use each number only once)
11. are biased or leading
12. include absolute terms (e.g., always, never)
13. use negative wording (e.g., How many lectures did you *not* attend?)
14. present arbitrary ranges of numerical values as response options or unnecessary categorization of numerical response options that could be reported as continuous data (e.g., 1-3 lectures, 4-6 lectures vs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 lectures as response options)

## Use of Rating Scales

Mistakes include presenting rating scales:

1. with too few or too many points (e.g., 5- or 7-point scales may *generally* be recommended)
2. that are biased or unbalanced (e.g., Poor, Fair, Good, Very Good, Excellent), unless appropriate to the survey purpose or audience
3. in a biased order (e.g., from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, from Very Good to Very Poor)
4. with construct labels that differ from the construct being measured by the item (e.g., confidence is measured on a scale of agreement rather than on a scale of level or amount of confidence)
5. with numerical values only, when text labels would be helpful (and numerical values may actually be unnecessary)
6. inconsistently across items or that vary markedly within the survey