

# SURVEYS 101: WRITING EFFECTIVE SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

---

Susan Thompson, Senior Research Analyst  
[susan@txstate.edu](mailto:susan@txstate.edu)


Office of Institutional Research  
245-2386

# Presentation Overview

- Question types
  - Structure
  - Rules
  - When to use
- General tips for writing questions
- Organizing questions in a survey

are you childish?

yes

 no

The image shows a survey question 'are you childish?' with two response options. The 'yes' option is represented by an empty square checkbox. The 'no' option is represented by a small icon of a house with a tree to its left, followed by the text 'no'.

# Survey Information Types

## Demographic

- Descriptive information about respondent
- Gender, age, GPA, home location

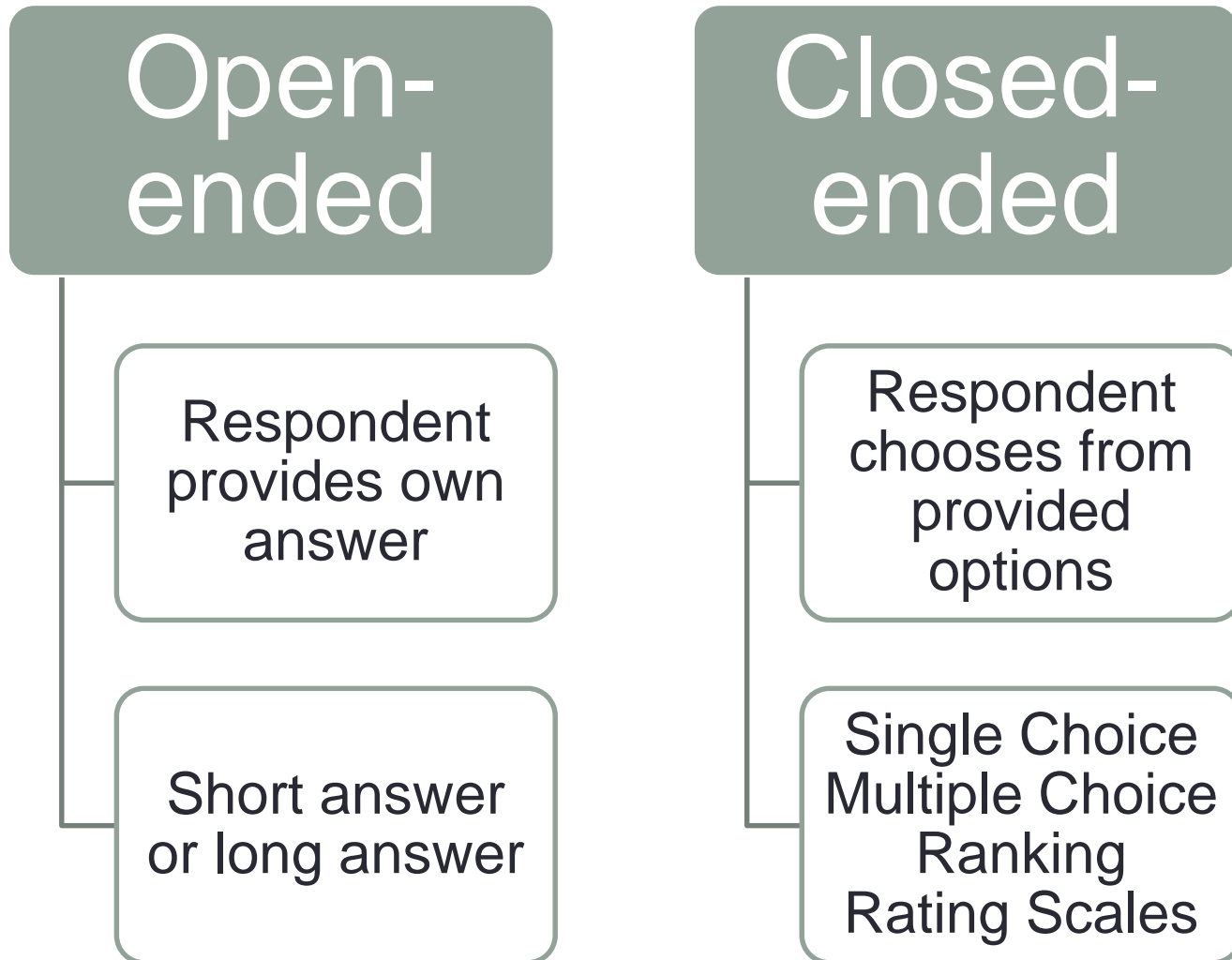
## Behavioral

- How does respondent behave?
- Use/non-use, frequency, actions

## Attitudinal

- Respondent's opinions/attitudes
- Satisfaction, agreement, preference

# Survey Question Types



# Closed-Ended: Single Choice Question

“Have you attended a Texas State University athletic event within the past year?”



- Forces a clear choice between two alternatives (e.g. yes/no, true/false, agree/disagree, satisfied/dissatisfied)
- Does not permit detailed responses
- Does not allow uncertain responses
- Good for starting a series of questions with skip/go to logic

# Closed-Ended: Single Choice Question

About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week working for pay on campus?

- None
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- More than 30

Permits respondents to choose from a pre-determined set of responses.

# Single Choice Question Examples

Which of the following best describes your relationship or position with Texas State University?

- Student
- Department Chair
- Faculty
- Academic Advisor
- Other Texas State staff
- Other, please specify:  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

- Younger than 20
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 or older
- I prefer not to answer

# Single Choice Question Tips

- Responses should be mutually exclusive
  - Be careful of common errors like the following: 1-4 hours, 4-8 hours, etc.
- Responses should be exhaustive
  - Use “Other, please specify” if necessary
- Order responses logically for ease of reading
- Instruct respondents to choose only one response on paper surveys; can set up web surveys to limit response automatically



# Closed-Ended: Multiple Choice Questions

How did you learn about Texas State admission requirements (check all that apply)?

- Texas State admission counselor
- Texas State website
- High school admission counselor
- Published college guidebook
- Friend or family member
- Other (please specify \_\_\_\_\_)

Allows for more than one response to a single question.

# Multiple Choice Question Examples

What is the best time of day for you to participate in exercise classes during the work week? (Check all that apply.)

- Before work
- During lunch
- After work
- None of the above

What student service office(s) have you visited during this semester? (Check all that apply.)

- Admissions
- Career Services
- Counseling Center
- Disability Services
- Financial Aid
- Health Center
- Housing
- ID Services
- Registrar
- None of the above

# Multiple Choice Question Tips

- Include instruction to “Check all that apply”
- Include “Other, please specify” if necessary
- Order responses in some logical way to make it easier to read through the list
- Results will give you information about what responses are most popular with respondents overall

# Closed-Ended: Ranking Questions

- Rank the relative importance of the following ways to learn about job openings at Texas State:  
(1=most important and 5=least important)
  - \_\_\_ Texas State employment website
  - \_\_\_ Texas State Human Resources Office
  - \_\_\_ Local newspaper
  - \_\_\_ Professional organization website
  - \_\_\_ Friend or family member

Can determine relative importance of a series of items.

# Ranking Question Tips

- The fewer the items, the better.
  - 3 is good, 8 is too many
- Include clear instructions about what is high and what is low
- Provide “Other” response if appropriate
- Consider need carefully
  - Would a series of single or multiple choice questions work better than one ranking question?

# Ranking Question Example

Rank the relative importance of the following ways to learn about job openings at Texas State:

(1=most important and 5=least important)

- Texas State employment website
- Texas State Human Resources Office
- Local newspaper
- Professional organization website
- Friend or family member

# Suggestions for improvement:

How did you learn about job openings at Texas State (check all that apply):

- Texas State employment website
- Texas State Human Resources Office
- Local newspaper
- Professional organization website
- Friend or family member
- None of the above

Which of the following ways of learning about Texas State jobs is **most useful** to you?

- Texas State Human Resources Office
- Local newspaper
- Friend or family member

# Closed-Ended: Rating Scale Questions

How satisfied are you with the survey assistance you received from Institutional Research?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied

To determine degree of something. Allows for more precision in measurement; easy to answer; good for series of related questions.



# Rating Scale Question Tips

- Use a balanced scale
- Using a neutral midpoint is a personal preference
- Include a “Not Applicable” choice if needed
- Use clear, unbiased language; do not lead respondent to give a certain response
- Likert scale example websites:
  - <http://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/tourism/documents/sample-scales.pdf>
  - [http://researchbasics.education.uconn.edu/likert\\_scales/](http://researchbasics.education.uconn.edu/likert_scales/)

# Rating Scale Label Options: Satisfaction

<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>
-----------------------	------------------	---	---------------------	--------------------------

<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>
-----------------------	------------------	---------------------	--------------------------

<b>Completely dissatisfied</b>	<b>Mostly dissatisfied</b>	<b>Slightly dissatisfied</b>	<b>Slightly satisfied</b>	<b>Mostly satisfied</b>	<b>Completely satisfied</b>
--------------------------------	----------------------------	------------------------------	---------------------------	-------------------------	-----------------------------

<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>
------------------	------------------	---------------------

<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>.</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>.</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>
-----------------------	----------	----------------	----------	--------------------------

# Use a Grid for a Series of Rating Questions

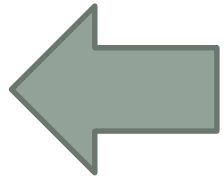


Stem of question here

Please indicate your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the following aspects of the commencement ceremony you attended:

Rating labels here

Items here



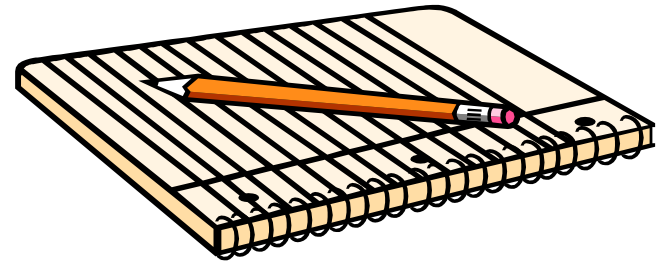
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Parking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shuttle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



# Open-Ended: Short Answer Questions

“What is your age?” \_\_\_\_\_

“What is your intended academic major?” \_\_\_\_\_



- Can be a number or text
- Use if
  - responses can't be categorized
  - list of categorical responses is long
  - you want flexibility to set up response categories later
  - you need continuous data for the analyses you plan to use.

# Open-Ended: Long Answer Questions

“Describe your best experience at New Student Orientation this summer.”

- Allows responses from a sentence to several pages long; gathers a rich source of data; can be time-consuming to analyze.



# Open-Ended Question Tips

- Use them sparingly
  - In general, people don't like to take the time to answer
  - Multiple open-ended questions tend to yield repetitive or "as I said above" answers
- End with one
  - Catch-all for miscellaneous information you did not ask about
  - Opportunity for respondent to explain
- Standard prompts for closing question:
  - "Please share any comments you have regarding X"
  - "Do you have any further comments regarding X?"

# General Tips for Writing Questions

## Ask clear questions

- Define key terms
- Be specific
- Use jargon or abbreviations with care

When did you first enroll in classes at TXST?

When did you first enroll in classes at Texas State?

How many people live in your household?

Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

How often do you visit the Student Recreation Center?

This semester, how often do you visit the Student Recreation Center in a typical week?

# General Tips for Writing Questions: Ask clear questions, continued...

How often do you use our office?

All the time  Very often  Sometimes  Once or twice  Never

On average, how often do you contact our office?

Once per week  Once per month  Once per semester  Once per year  Never

This semester, how often have you contacted our office by telephone?

Never  Once  2-3 times  4-5 times  6 or more times



# General Tips for Writing Questions

## Ask relevant questions

- Do not ask questions that people cannot answer
- Use “skip” or “go to” branching patterns

Which of the following sessions did you attend?

A, B, C or D

Which of the following sessions did you attend?

A, B, C, D or I did not attend a session

Did you attend a session? Yes or No

If yes, which session(s) did you attend?

A, B, C or D

# General Tips for Writing Questions

## Allow skipped questions

- Do not force/require people to answer a question
- Provide an alternative response choice

What is your total annual income from all sources?

- Less than \$30,000
- \$30,000 - \$59,999
- \$60,000 or higher

Same as above, add “I prefer not to respond” response choice

# General Tips for Writing Questions

Ask one  
question at a  
time

- Watch out for “and”
- Avoid asking multipurpose questions

How friendly and helpful was the front desk staff?

How friendly was the front desk staff?

How helpful was the front desk staff?

# General Tips for Writing Questions

Avoid biased questions

- Use neutral language
- Invite true responses

Please rate your agreement with this statement: “The workshop program was of high quality”.

Strongly agree  Agree  Undecided  Disagree  Strongly disagree

Please rate the overall quality of the workshop program:

Excellent  Good  Fair  Poor  Unacceptable

# Organizing Questions in a Survey

- Start with easy or interesting questions
- Only ask what you need to know/plan to use
  - Focus your questions
  - Surveys are not tests!
- Ask questions in a logical order
  - Use the “funnel” approach to design
- Break questions into sections/pages
- Ask demographic questions at end (or preload in web surveys using a custom link for each respondent)
- In ratings questions: Repeat headers on grid questions so that visual reference stays on page/screen

# Resources

- Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The tailored design method*, second edition. New York: John Wiley.
- Office of Institutional Research survey design resources website: <http://www.ir.txstate.edu/survey-services/survey-resources.html>