

Bad survey checklist

When you're setting up a survey to collect data, there are many, many things that can go wrong. Fortunately, with a bit of care you can ensure you avoid these pitfalls. Bad data isn't just frustrating, it's very time-consuming to deal with. Take your survey and compare it with the checklist below – how does it compare and what can you do to avoid getting bad data?

#1 Start without knowing what you want to learn from your respondents and why.

To avoid this, think very carefully (and ideally in collaboration with your colleagues) about what information you want to gather and for what purpose. This helps you ask the right questions and prevents wasting valuable time – both yours and that of your respondents. It also helps you get started thinking about what you will do with the data once it is in, i.e. what kinds of analyses and presentations. [Click here](#) for more tips on analysis planning.

#2 Design bad questions.

In general, it's best to use existing surveys – surveys that have been carefully developed, scientifically tested, and can guarantee high quality data (otherwise known as validated surveys). However, where no such survey is available and you need to create your own, watch out – it's very easy to get it wrong and end up with bad data. Try to avoid the following:

Ambiguous wording. Make sure your respondents know exactly what you mean.

Bad question: Where did you live two years ago?

Is the researcher referring to a country? A city? Does he/she want to know whether you have lived in a house or a flat? It just isn't clear.

Leading questions. Ensure you don't put words in your respondents' mouths.

Bad question: How short are you? What car do you drive?

The respondent immediately feels the researcher makes some unfair assumptions – that you are short and own a car. Try more neutral wording.

Making other assumptions about your respondents. Avoid assuming prior knowledge.

Bad question: How effective is systemic therapy in your opinion?

Many respondents won't know what systemic therapy is and therefore aren't in a position to provide good data.

Asking two questions in one. This will give you very messy data. Stick to one question at a time.

Bad question: How long ago did you quit your last job and why?

Using absolutes. Never say “never”! Using absolute terms like this may force respondents to give unhelpful answers.

Bad question: Have you never taken any drugs? Yes/No

Very few people may be able to honestly select ‘No’, so most will select ‘Yes’. You’ll then have no idea whether you are dealing with heavy drug users or people who have just experimented during their teens. Absolutes are fine as answer options, provided there are non-absolutes too (e.g. sometimes).

Good question: How often have you used drugs over the last 12 months? a) Never, b) Once or twice, c) Once a month, d) Once a week, e) Several times per week

Negative question wording. You run a high risk of confusion and incorrect responses.

Bad question: How often do you not decline invitations to surveys?

Failing to offer an ‘other’ or ‘n/a’ option. Ensure that every respondent can select an option that applies to him/her.

Bad question: Who do you live with? 1) my parents, 2) my partner, 3) the cat

Good question: Who do you live with? 1) my parents, 2) my partner, 3) the cat, 4) other (please specify)

Respondents who live alone or with other people can now answer accurately.

Wrong response types. Consider whether your respondents should be able to select just one response, or whether they should be free to select as many options as they feel apply. Most survey platforms offer these sorts of settings, so use them wisely.

Frequently reversing scales. If you’re using numbers for scales (e.g. 1-5), don’t constantly change what ‘1’ means – e.g. ‘Always’ and in the next question it means ‘Never’. It’s usually best to just use words instead of numbers. However, switching the ‘Always’ for a ‘Never’ once or twice will stop respondents from just blindly responding to questions (or at least you’ll notice!) and will keep them alert.

Unsettling the respondent with demographic questions. Asking these types of questions first can feel intrusive. Therefore, ask these questions last, after the respondents know what the survey covered.

Asking too many questions. Don’t jam in as much as you can, thinking that this is your one chance to ask all your questions. Your respondents will get tired and provide worse data, and there really is no point in having data that you won’t use!

Providing too many answer options. Don’t tire your respondents out with too many long-worded options per question.

Too many open-ended questions. This again can be tiring for your respondents and many will resort to skipping these questions or respond in the shortest and most

informative way possible. Be strategic about where open-ended questions would bring the most value.

Overlapping answer options. Ensure your respondents know which option applies to them.

Bad answer options: What is your age? a) 0-18 b) 18-25, c) 25-40, d) 40-65, e) 65+

What option should I pick if I was 40?

Good answer options: What is your age? a) 0-18 b) 19-25, c) 26-40, d) 41-64, e) 65+

Using the wrong response type (level of measurement). There are two common levels – categorical and continuous. In the above example, the data will be categorical – each respondent will select one category of ages (e.g. 26-40). However, we won't be able to calculate the average age – averages and some other statistics are not possible with categorical data. If you want to report averages, you should go for continuous data using the following response type:

Good answer option: What is your age? a) 26, b) 27, c) 28, d) 29, e) 30

This way averages and other statistics can be calculated, giving you more analytical flexibility. In general, think about your planned analyses and design your response options accordingly.

Allowing respondents to skip over crucial questions. Most survey platforms let you choose whether respondents are required to respond to each question in order to move to the next question/page. Use this functionality wisely.

Spelling mistakes. Obvious, yet often forgotten. Arrange for fresh eyes to proof-read your finalised survey.

#3 Fail to test your survey before launch.

Ensure the survey is fit and functional before delivery. Send it to your colleagues – they'll almost certainly find some spelling mistakes or confusing wording that you missed because you are too close to the survey. Ideally test it with some target respondents too – they can alert you to confusing or upsetting wording that your colleagues may have missed.

#4 Deliver at the wrong time.

Do not send your survey out on a Friday afternoon. Consider when your respondents would be most likely to consider taking your survey.

#5 Deliver using discouraging wording.

How does your survey invitation appear to the respondent? Will he/she think it is from someone trustworthy, or is it junk mail? Is the subject line suspicious or intriguing? Does the text in your email get to the point quickly and mention incentives (if any) early on?

#6 Deliver using the wrong medium.

Will your respondents prefer filling in a paper or an online survey? Do your respondents typically have easy access to the internet? Generally, online surveys will save you (the practitioner/researcher) time when it comes to data entry and cleaning, but ensuring respondents feel comfortable with the medium is key to obtaining accurate data.

#7 Fail to equip the survey with an informative introduction.

Ensure you provide sufficient information either in the invitation or the survey landing page. Does the respondent know what the survey is about before he/she gets to the first question? Should the respondent fill in the survey on his/her own, or should it be facilitated by someone else? Keep in mind here how a facilitator would influence the respondent's answers, if at all.

Were you unable to cross off all these boxes? Don't worry, this is your chance to make some adjustments to your survey and you'll be heading towards getting more exciting, relevant and interesting data from your respondents.

Any questions? Let me help:

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