What Are You Asking?!
An Introduction to Survey Item Development
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SURVEY ITEM DEVELOPMENT TIPS

**DO**

- Include directions for answering the item (circle, check all that apply, etc.)
- Consider whether to use an open-ended or close-ended item
- Make sure the item helps you answer your overarching research question
- Highlight important terms using **bold** or underline
- Ensure the respondent has enough information to answer the question
- Consider what you really need to know
- Balance questions or provide counterarguments, where relevant
- Include a time frame or conditions, where relevant
- Use conversational structure
- Consider what kind of response format is most appropriate for close-ended items (multiple choice, dichotomous, ratings, rankings, etc.)
- Use 5-7 response anchors for ratings of unipolar concepts and 5-9 for bipolar concepts
- Label all response anchors for ratings
- Spell out all response anchors for ratings
- Use the least extreme wording as possible for the high and low ends of a response scale
- Put demographic items at the end
- Use ranges, where possible, for potentially sensitive personal information like ages or incomes
- Test our your items/survey before collecting the final data!

**DON’T**

- Ask two – or more – questions within one item
- Use complex sentences
- Use a blank in the middle of an item
- Ask cognitively taxing items if an easier question is possible
- Use jargon, technical language, or acronyms
- Use loaded or emotional language that might bias responses
- Include an assumption within an item (for example, assuming a visitor engaged in all aspects of an exhibit or program)
- Just number response anchors for ratings
- Abbreviate response anchors for ratings
Glossary of Terms

- **Survey Item**: An individual survey ‘question’
- **Open-Ended Item**: An item that invites a free response
- **Closed-Ended Item**: An item with a limited set of possible responses
- **Double-Barreled Item**: An item with two (or more) questions built into it
- **Response Anchor**: The individual response options in a rating item
- **Response Scale**: The entire set of response anchors in a rating item
- **Primacy Effect**: When reading, people are more likely to focus on the first thing they see
- **Recency Effect**: When listening, people are more likely to focus the last thing they hear
- **Anchoring Effect**: People will use the first response anchor as the starting point to make a decision about the entire response scale. Similarly, they will adjust their responses to future items based on the first item on a survey.
- **Unipolar Concept**: Just one side of a concept is included (not at all X to completely X)
- **Bipolar Concept**: Two opposing sides of a concept are included (disagree and agree)

Item Improvement Examples

Double-barreled:  Did you purchase something in the gift shop or restaurant?
Better: Did you purchase something in the gift shop? Did you purchase something in the restaurant?

Too Complex: In the last year, how many hours did you spend on the Internet?
Better: In an average day, how many hours do you spend on the Internet?

Emphasizes one side of the issue: Do you support offering iPads in the galleries?
More balanced: Do you support or oppose offering iPads in the galleries?

Assumes: What in the exhibit was fun for you?
Better: What, if anything, in the exhibit was fun for you?

Assumes: Did you enjoy the video?
Better: Did you watch the video? If so, did you enjoy it?

Vague: Do you think you will visit again?
Specific time: Do you think you will visit again during the next year?
Specific condition: Do you think you will visit for the next family day?

Avoid: Never 1 2 3 4 5 Always
Clearly Labeled: Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

Too Personal: What is your annual household income? ___________
Better: Which range includes your annual household income? (circle one)
$0-29,999 $30,000-59,999 $60,000-79,999 $80,000-100,000 Over $100,000