# How to Write Survey Questions

Dr. Sarah Strout

Dr. Sandra Baker

Office of Academic Assessment

Our Turn May 2017

# Survey Research

- Seems simple, but it is not
- Bad questions = bad information
- Wrong questions = wrong information
- Type of question affects the type of information
- How much work you have to do to interpret the information depends on the type of question

# Before Writing

- Know your audience
  - What language should you use
- Know the goal of the survey
- Know what answers you want
  - examples, numbers, attitudes etc.
- Plan enough time for someone else to look over the questions before you implement the survey
- Anonymous/confidential/open
- IRB (research, publication, presentation)

# General Best Practices

- Include a short introduction/instructions (why)
- Keep it as short as possible (10-20 questions max)
- Keep it as simple as possible, relax your grammar
- Avoid open-ended and fill-in questions whenever possible
- Be specific
- Don't include 'wouldn't it be nice to know' questions

# Survey Mode

- Online
  - Easier to contact many people
  - May not get as many responses
- Paper (mail, return later, in class etc.)
  - Harder to get participants
  - May get a better response rate

# Types of Questions

- Close-ended
  - Pros: Easy to administer, easy to analyze
  - Cons: Less detailed information
  - Use when you already know what information you want
    - Categorical
    - Scale
- Open-ended
  - Pros: More detailed information, may get answer didn't expect
  - Cons: Difficult and time consuming to analyze)=
  - Use when you do not know what type of information you expect/want

# Categorical Questions

- Yes/No
- Multiple Choice/Drop Down
- Multiple Answer/Check Box
- Gives you total numbers and percentages
  - 18% of students, or 45 out of 140 students
- Be sure to include all options
- Think carefully about having an n/a, not sure, no opinion option
- If use 'other' be sure to have them write in what it is

# Yes/No

- Yes/No
- More options
  - Definitely no
  - No
  - Uncertain
  - Yes
  - Definitely Yes
- Example
  - Did your coursework in Major X prepare you for a career?

# Multiple Choice

- Make sure to include all options, but not a huge list
- Check response options
  - Ex. 0-1 hour, 1-3 hours, 6-7 hours vs. 0-1 hour, 2-3 hours, 4-5 hours
- Know ahead of time what the most common answers would be
- Be cautious about using n/a, not sure, prefer not to answer, etc.
- Example:
  - How many hours a week did you typically study for your courses?
    - 0-1
    - 2-3
    - 3-4
    - 4-5
    - 6 or more

# Multiple Answer

- Can choose all that apply (don't use if you want to know which is more important/effective etc)
- Use when there are multiple options a participant could choose
- Example:
  - Which of the following activities did you participate in as part of Major X (Choose all that apply)?
    - Internship
    - Teaching assistant
    - Research
    - Peer mentor

# Scales

- Gives you averages (average rating was 4.5 on a 5 pt scale)
- Usually a 5 point or 7 point scale
- Points should be labeled clearly
- Using a middle category gives you better results
- Equal number of positive/negative options

# Scales

- Common scales
  - How often
    - Never
    - Rarely
    - Sometimes
    - Most of the time
    - Always
  - How (satisfied, helpful, etc)
    - Not at all
    - A little
    - Somewhat
    - Mostly
    - Very
  - To what extent (do you agree)
    - Strongly disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree
- Example:
  - How satisfied are you with the quality of education you received in Major X?

# Open-ended

- Only use if you are not sure what answers you might get
- Allows participants to choose own answer
- Might not be what you are looking for
- Requires a lot of coding
- Examples:
  - What was the best course you took in Major X?
  - What are some ways we can improve Major X?

# Common Mistakes

- Leading questions
- Loaded questions
- Double-barreled questions
- Technical language/jargon
- Negative wording
- Using vague language

# Leading Questions

- Suggests a correct answer
- Example:
  - Do you believe that liberal arts courses, which are essential to a broad education, should be included in Major X requirements?
  - Do you believe that liberal arts courses should be included in Major X requirements?

# Loaded Questions

- Loaded with an assumption
- Example:
  - Where do you plan to go to graduate school?
  - Do you plan to go to graduate school? If so, where?

# Double-barreled Questions

- Includes more than one question
- Example:
  - <span style="color:red">Should X Major increase the number of courses and internship opportunities over the next five years?</span>
  - <span style="color:green">Should X Major increase the number of courses over the next five years?</span>
  - <span style="color:green">Should X Major increase the number of internship opportunities over the next five years?</span>

# Negative Wording

- Negatively worded questions (both single and double negatives) are hard to understand
- Examples:
  - I do not agree that Major X should not include internship as an option to fulfill senior level requirements
  - I agree that Major X should include internship as an option to fulfill senior level requirements
  - I do not think that Major X should include online courses.
  - I think Major X should include online courses.

# Technical Language/Jargon

- Would your audience know the words/concepts you are using?
- Tip: go with an 8$^{th}$ grade reading level
- Examples:
  - How do you feel about transparency in education?
  - How do you feel about professors being open about what they are teaching in their courses?
  - Did any of your courses discuss the relevance of existential threats to the human experience of autonomy?
  - There is no way to fix this question ☺

# Vague Wording

- Participants might not interpret the same as you
- Example:
  - How important is it that Major X provides you with career opportunities?
  - How important is it that Major X provides you with internship opportunities?

# Order of Questions

- General to specific
- Easy to difficult
- Leave sensitive questions for last (including demographics)
- Keep similar topics together

# Free Online Survey Options

- Qualtrics (https://www.qualtrics.com/academic-solutions/radford-university/)

- Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com)
  - 10 questions; 100 responses

- Google Forms (www.google.com/forms/about/)

- Survey Gizmo (www.surveygizmo.com/free-survey-software/)
  - 125 questions; 100 responses

- Amazon Mturk (http://www.mturkcrowd.com/threads/how-to-publish-a-survey-on-mechanical-turk.299/

# Activity

- Come up with 5 questions
  - On any topic
  - Include different types of questions