

## Expanding Local Voices...

# Designing Un-slanted Surveys

*C.A. Lindstrom*

Governments *can* use a lot of different tools in order to elicit information from citizens. There are public meetings, websites, videos, and, of course, the often used and even more often abused "Survey". Surveys, whether online, face-to-face, or mailed out, are a common method for governments to use in order to develop an understanding of how citizens feel about certain issues/proposals.

Unfortunately, all of these, particularly surveys can easily be used as tools to gently (or not so gently) guide the public away from making their own decision and, instead, making a decision that government wants them to make. This is exactly why there is so much controversy over the use of surveys. So, let's begin by looking at some of the acknowledged shortcomings of surveys, then look to see how those shortcomings can be used by the writer of the survey to generate desired responses, then let's look at how those questions could be changed to really allow citizens to participate in an open and honest forum.

It is a simple process to shape questions such that the responses given will be precisely the responses the jurisdiction wants citizens to provide. This is NOT open government or good government. Sometimes it is easier to explain what to do by showing what not to do. For this discussion, I will be using 2 questionnaires that are great examples of how NOT to do a survey. I am very familiar with these surveys to the point that I know that they were specifically designed to produce a desired outcome.

### Case Study: When Surveys Go Astray

It is often easier to understand how to do something by looking at examples that do not work rather than examples that do. Such is the case with surveys.

This case study is based on two examples. The first is a questionnaire designed to elicit information from citizens about sidewalks and pertains to a question of whether or not sidewalks should be required in new developments within the Town.

Unfortunately, that question/goal is not noted in the survey.

The second example elicits citizen input on the adoption of Town historic district(s) overlays and potential regulations for the district(s). Specifically, it notes:

The [name of jurisdictions] has prepared this questionnaire in order to determine public sentiment in regards to the adoption of Town historic district(s) and the potential for additional regulations. As a part of the process, the Town would like to solicit input from its citizenry. This questionnaire is part of the public participation process and will be supplemented by a Town meeting scheduled for Monday, April 5, 2010 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. The Town would like to know your opinions so please take the time to fully complete this questionnaire. For Questions 1 through 6, please circle one number for each line item. For 7 through 19, please complete the blanks or circle the appropriate response. Please indicate "not applicable" to any question by writing NA beside the item/question. After completion, please return the questionnaire to the [name of planner] by March 1, 2010. Please

### Online Resources: Sample Documents

[Historic District Questionnaire Goals and Pros and Cons](#)

[Historic District Questionnaire](#)

mail the questionnaire or bring it to the Planning Department at Town Hall. Thank you for your participation.

The Town historic district document also came with a cover letter to explain the goals of the questionnaire and provided a list of both pros and cons of Historic Districts . Unfortunately, this was not information that was accessible to the general public as it was sent to only those people who owned property in and adjacent to existing historic districts. Exactly how well those goals were addressed in the questionnaire will be discussed later. Without clearly defining the objectives of the survey, you may obtain information that is useless.

### *Manipulation “R” Us...*

Stilted or slanted surveys are all too common and are easy to spot if you are familiar with the tricks of the trade. Unfortunately, most citizens are not familiar with survey techniques in general or the manipulation techniques that can be and are used to “herd” them in a predetermined direction. Few things make me more angry than to see a survey/questionnaire designed that is clearly biased and designed to lead citizens to a predetermined answer. It is disturbing to hear that a public agency actually went to a qualified professional and asked that person to design a survey and supplied them with both the primary question (the one which the whole survey is designed to answer) and the desired answer, then specify that the survey must lead to that result. Not only is that dishonest, it is just plain lazy and incompetent. In this case, the qualified professional sent the representative packing.

Indeed, you no longer need to pay a professional to create a distorted survey. You can simply go online and find out how to do it yourself by looking at the information from organizations and online sites like [ChangingMinds.org](http://ChangingMinds.org). The site gives you all of the information needed to design an survey/questionnaire carefully designed to drive citizens to a predetermined result. I'm sure there are legitimate reasons for doing such a survey, but I do not believe that such a survey would be consistent with open and honest government when you hire a "professional" to do it or go to the internet for "do-it-yourself" instructions. For citizens and staff, there is one benefit from sites like [ChangingMinds](http://ChangingMinds.org): knowing manipulation techniques makes it easier to spot manipulation techniques in the surveys you receive and avoid introducing bias in the surveys you design. It is just plain common sense to think that if you are not eliciting information in an honest and above-board manner, then the data that you receive is NOT going to be what citizens really want. Additionally, if the information obtained through such a survey is being presented to elected officials, those officials are not getting an accurate representation of citizen/voter input.

### **Online Resources:**

Manipulating  
Opinions:  
[ChangingMinds.org](http://ChangingMinds.org)

### *What is the primary question you wish to have answered?*

Why are you even sitting down to develop a survey? What is it that you want to find out? What will you do with the information that you receive? These questions are what should establish the parameters for all other questions in the survey. Not only do they give you guidance on what questions should be asked, they help you decide which type of question will produce responses that meet your needs.

The primary question should be provided to the audience so that they have a proper context for the questions they are about to answer. If the questions found in the survey are not clearly supported by the primary question, how can the responses be an accurate reflection of citizen feelings/thoughts on the issue? Quite simply they cannot.

Take for instance the excerpt from the introduction to a survey that I noted

in the previous section:

The \_\_\_\_\_ has prepared this questionnaire in order to determine public sentiment in regards to the adoption of Town historic district(s) and the potential for additional regulations. As a part of the process, the Town would like to solicit input from its citizenry. This questionnaire is part of the public participation process and will be supplemented by a Town meeting scheduled for Monday, April 5, 2010 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. The Town would like to know your opinions so please take the time to fully complete this questionnaire. For Questions 1 through 6, please circle one number for each line item. For 7 through 19, please complete the blanks or circle the appropriate response. Please indicate "not applicable" to any question by writing NA beside the item/question. After completion, please return the questionnaire to the \_\_\_\_\_ by March 1, 2010. Please mail the questionnaire or bring it to the Planning Department at Town Hall. Thank you for your participation.

The first sentence of this paragraph gives the responder a description of what the survey is designed to accomplish:

"The \_\_\_\_\_ has prepared this questionnaire in order to determine public sentiment in regards to the adoption of Town historic district(s) and the potential for additional regulations."

Based upon this, it appears that the Town wants to know what citizens think/feel about (1) the adoption of Town historic district(s) and (2) the potential for additional regulations. While #1 is fairly clear, I can see problems with #2. In #2 there is nothing to indicate whether there are additional regulations that would apply to the town as a whole, only to the specific historic districts, or to the specific districts and surrounding properties. Without clearly identifying where the restrictions would apply, citizens using different interpretations may have very different responses. That variability in the responses would lead to invalid data.

*Identify your audience, those from whom you wish to elicit responses.*

This particular survey was sent out only to the owners of property within and adjacent to existing federal or state recognized historic districts. It did not include those additional areas where expansion of the designated area would likely occur. Nor, did it include the general population of the town, those people who perhaps rent property within those districts for their businesses and may or may not be dependent upon the "historic quality" of the area for their economic well-being.

Since it was designed for a small percentage of the population, the questions developed in the survey should be addressed only to those participating in the study and should have dealt with the specifics of how the issue will impact those people. Unfortunately, the cover letter attached to the questionnaire indicates a far broader audience that those specifically invited to participate.

*The Town of ----- is considering the potential adoption of local historic districts and accompanying regulations. We would like to make you aware of some of the pros and cons of this potential*

situation and also let you know the goals of the accompanying questionnaire. **Please note that regulations may be forthcoming based in part on the responses that the Town receives, so please fill out and return the questionnaire – it may affect the use of your property.**

#### *Historic District Questionnaire Goals*

1. Make the public aware of the existing districts and buildings listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and National Register of Historic Places.
2. Make the public aware that the Town could adopt its own historic district(s) and incorporate regulations into the Zoning Ordinance.
3. Determine if the public sentiment is to pursue the adoption of Town local historic district(s) and incorporation of regulations into the Zoning Ordinance.
4. If the public sentiment is to pursue the adoption of Town historic district(s) and incorporation of regulations into the Zoning Ordinance, determine what the districts should be, what type of regulations should be enacted, and to what extent the regulations should control existing and new development.
5. If the public sentiment is to pursue the adoption of Town historic district(s) and incorporation of regulations into the Zoning Ordinance, determine if the public desires an architectural review board.

As an opener or introduction, this looks pretty good, right? Hmm! Not if you look at how the survey was actually used. Unless the agency conducting the survey openly defined "the public" as less than 1% of the population who actually own properties in or adjacent to the areas in question, these goals are not being met.

Many of the people in historic districts know about the districts, choose to own property in them, and (in many cases) have already received tax credits and other benefits afforded those owning property in the districts. While the scope of the goals is broad and inclusive, the fact that only certain people were selected to participate sets a bias that will affect the outcomes. If you are going to survey a limited number of participants, make that known up front and realize that the data received is NOT going to be an accurate representation of the "public" since there is a clear selection bias on the part of the researcher.

*Stop and take some time to make a list of how "you" feel about the issue.*

Keeping your own values and goals out of the survey is crucial to the development of a good survey/questionnaire. You cannot obtain open, honest answers from citizens if you are twisting the questions to suit your own needs and feelings. Just because something might make more work for you does not mean you should phrase questions in a manner that causes citizens to provide an answer that makes sure you do not have to do the extra work. Using the "fear tactics" such as threats of more or higher taxes in your questions creates an environment where citizens are likely to choose answers that would reduce their fear.

Sometimes the "devil is in the details". Let's take a few examples from the historic questionnaire discussed earlier. In the introduction sheet, pros and cons are listed. It isn't until you take a look at the tone of the lists and see how they compare with each other that you see the bias directed to prevent historic district adoption.

#### *Historic District Pros*

1. *Additional regulation may assist in protecting historical properties/neighborhoods*
2. *Tourism promotion*
3. *Potential increase in access to or likelihood of historic preservation tax credits, tax abatements, loans or grants.*
4. *Potentially maintain and/or improve property values by providing incentives for upkeep, rehabilitation, and restoration.*
5. *Can help to educate and connect residents and visitors about the Town's cultural heritage, history, and architecture.*
6. *Assure that new construction will be in harmony with the historical character and architectural setting of a neighborhood.*
7. *Recognizes the value of existing places and helps to preserve a sense of place.*
8. *Encourages re-investment and protects property owner and local government investment.*
9. *Can be linked to plaques, signage, walking tours, and local historic curriculum*

#### *Historic District Cons*

1. *Additional regulation may limit property owners ability to change uses, modify structures, demolish structures, etc. (sometimes discouraging or preventing rehabilitation or redevelopment).*
2. *Additional regulation may result in additional need for staff and/or increase in taxes to cover Town's expenses.*
3. *If the Town were to offer incentives for upkeep, rehabilitation, and/or restoration, this would be an additional expense for the Town, increasing or reallocating Town taxes.*
4. *Additional review by Planning Commission or an architectural review board and Town Council would result in costs for property owners/developers in terms of permits fees and result in delays required for the approval processes.*
5. *Additional expenses for property owners/developers caused by new requirements or conditions.*

First off, in any reasonable argument, the pros and cons should match up, at least for the most part. The information provide here does not follow such a pattern. In fact, because of the higher number of "Pros" listed, a false sense

that the questionnaire will lean towards the promotion of such an ordinance and regulation when, in fact, it does the exact opposite. At the same time, let's look at the choice of words used and which words have an "emotional hook" attached. I've underlined those in the above list. Note the number of "charged" words and phrases expressed in the Cons section.

There is very little about the well documented benefits of historic districts such as tourism and the associated economic impact that generates tax revenue, so why have all of the negatives concerning taxes in the Cons section. Balance should be present in these because they are NOT intended to be persuasive arguments, rather they should simply be informational in nature. In fact, arguments, because they are designed to shape decision-making, should not be a part of any survey or questionnaire UNLESS the ultimate goal is to drive the direction of the decisions made. Save the argument part of things for AFTER you've elicited citizen input as part of the information provided to elected officials.

*4. Keep the survey/questionnaire short and choose appropriate questions.*

Historic District Survey: In the Historic District Questionnaire there are 20 questions. The number of questions alone does not control either the quality of the data received or the response rates. There are different types of questions which can be asked and there are several websites where descriptions and samples of these can be found:

Each of the question types have limits of appropriate usage and have both advantages and disadvantages. Basically, they fall into 5 general categories:

1. Open-ended: text, short answer, or essay type answers
2. Close-ended: simple yes/no or multiple-choice questions where the respondent chooses the most appropriate response
3. Partial open-ended: takes a close-ended question and adds an 'other' option for the respondent to provide more details in an open-ended style
4. Scaled: the respondent gives the degree to which they agree or disagree to something
5. Ranking: where the respondent put the items listed in order of importance

The first 6 questions in this questionnaire are of the Scaled type in that each person rates each of the items listed as to how strongly they feel about the importance of that item. Although multiple items are listed, each item has a unique response and multiple items can have the same response.

What is important in these questions is that the author of the questions must have relatively good knowledge of the topic in order to write the questions properly and to phrase responses that mesh with the evaluating criteria (i.e., Not Needed, Alright as is, and Much Needed). The gaps and the 2 and 4 marks where there is no descriptor indicating the strength of feeling, there is a gray area that is even more subject to the respondent's interpretation than the ones that are identified. But, more importantly, with the issues listed, one has to wonder at the level of knowledge required for the respondent to provide valid information, for instance:

Question 1) How strongly do you feel that the following are needed:

	<i>Not Needed</i>		<i>Alright as is</i>		<i>Much Needed</i>
<i>Town historic district recognition</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Town historic district regulation</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Town architectural review board</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Town tax funds for private rehabilitation</i>	1	2	3	4	5

This simply makes me wonder who in the heck this questionnaire is being written for? Obviously, a certain degree of knowledge is required simply to understand the answers. Sure, you'll get answers because people will try to respond based upon what they do know, but I'd be willing to bet that if 10 people were asked to define what "recognition", "regulation", "review board", or "private rehabilitation" means in this specific context, you would get 10 different answers to each UNLESS people were provided with definitions and the definitions were clear enough to be easily understood by the general public.

Question 3 of this group creates even more of a problem:

Question 3) How do you view the following regulations in terms of stringency needed:

	<i>Not Needed</i>		<i>Alright as is</i>		<i>Much Needed</i>
<i>Additional use regulations</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Architecture</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Building materials</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Color/paint schemes</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Slope of roof</i>	1	2	3	4	5

Will the general public understand the question? Starting off with a question that needs explanation just to understand the question is not a good thing. What is meant by regulations? How does the term stringency apply when it comes to regulations? Does this relate to guidelines? Does this relate to changes in the law? How are the listed items related to historic districts and does that really differ from any other ordinance designed to maintain the visual integrity of an existing neighborhood?

If citizens are using the internet to check on definitions of words they may be unfamiliar with, such as "stringency", they can get a wide range of definitions. For instance, the first definition to show on a Google search for "define: stringency" is "a state occasioned by scarcity of money and a shortage of credit. How is that for setting the tone of an answer?"

For the individual items in the question, does the general public know what "use regulations" are and how they might vary within a historic district as opposed to any other zoning districts? Architecture, building materials, and color/paint schemes can mean different things to different people. Even to people with knowledge of historic districts, in order to answer the question they must make assumptions as to whether or not the interior or exterior of

the buildings are in question or is it both? Building materials: does this apply to materials for the building itself or does it apply to any additional features like sidewalks, driveways, etc. Do these apply to new construction, restoration, or both? And, perhaps, most questionable of all is "Slope of the roof". Just what has that got to do with anything? Historic Districts can be comprised of one basic architectural style or of many different styles. That could well mean that different buildings would need different roof styles in order to maintain the buildings historical integrity.

The next 7 questions relate more to demographic information and are of a Yes/No type. Where someone owns property in, lives in, or has a business in one of the 3 historic districts, there is also an opportunity for the respondent to indicate which of the districts. There is one question asking for the name of the street the person lives on but from there things really get twisted.

*Question #12: How many people at your address are natives of the Town?*

How is this question even remotely useful to the study? It stands out like an ostrich in a hen house! What weight will this response be given and for what purpose? Do those people who have lived in the town all of their lives have more or less of a vested interest than those who have purchased historic structures, moved here, and restored them?

*Question #13: how many years has each person at your address lived in the Town?*

Again, what is the relevance of the question? What will the responses provide to the study to meet the goals the questionnaire was "designed" to achieve?

*Question #14: If the Town adopts historic district(s) should they be smaller, larger, or the same as those recognized on the Virginia Landmarks Register and National Register of Historic Places? (responses offered are: Smaller, Larger, The Same, Not Sure)*

Although maps were provided, is it likely the public knows what the two Registers are and has enough about the surround areas and the impact that changes in the surrounding areas can have on the historic districts to answer the question? Do they have the knowledge of the way in which zoning requests, rezoning requests, and/or Conditional Use Permits in the surrounding areas can impact the historic districts? These are just a few of the things people should have knowledge of before they are expected to answer such questions.

*Question #15: Do you believe a property owner should have the right to demolish a structure in a historic district if it is in disrepair without any additional regulation? Yes, No, Not Sure*

*Question #16: Would you be willing to pay additional taxes in order to better enforce regulations and enact new regulations in historic districts? Yes, No, Not Sure*

Clearly Question #15 and #16 are inflammatory questions. #15 could have come right out of any handbook on property rights. #16 sets up the



parameters for a congressional deadlock! If you wanted to ask a question to which most people would give a clear NO response, either of these would do the trick. Yet, if people were given sufficient information on the topics, they might well have chosen otherwise. For instance, in #15, if it is acknowledged that while the property owner does have rights, but the expression of those rights could have a negative impact on surrounding properties and businesses, should there be some level of control to try to work with the owner to try to maintain the integrity of the historic district? In #16 why focus only on the possibility of tax increases? If you read the question thoroughly and know the jurisdiction involved, you would know that they already use a complaint driven form of code enforcement such that codes are not enforced unless there are complaints. There is no proactive approach to code enforcement in existence. Given the very low volume of properties within the districts, the increase in the number of complaints would not be likely to increase significantly or to have any appreciable impact on the cost of enforcement.

Questions #17, #18, and #19 are all open ended questions and give citizens an opportunity to put in their own comments.

*#17: What are three things you would like to see regulated if historic districts are adopted?*

*#18: What are three things you would not like to see regulated if historic districts are adopted?*

These may seem to be pretty simple questions. However, when people take the time to respond to surveys, they like to know that the information is useful. The jurisdiction where this survey was done happens to be a "Dillon Rule State" which means that the local jurisdictions can only do what the State allows the jurisdiction to do. First and foremost, in order to answer the questions effectively, it would have been nice to have something indicating what would be ALLOWED to be regulated. Citizen responses should be based upon what is possible, not some nebulous ideas that will end up being shot down because of State laws.

*19) Please use the space below to provide any detail to the previous questions or make any additional comments regarding the possibility of Town historic district(s) and/or regulations.*

The #19 question is 4 lines available for citizens to put in a text response concerning details to the preceding questions and for adding their own questions about the process. This is Too Little & Too Late in my opinion. Unless time is taken to clean up the questions presented and provide details which give citizens an understanding of what the questions and responses are really about, each individual question (other than the demographics) could fill this section. Another alternative would have been to have a section after each question for people to put in this type of information. In lieu of either of those, at the very least, definitions for terms used should have been included. Had this survey been tested with a small group of average citizens, questions could have come forward that would have helped to clarify the issues presented in the survey.

#20 question is simply a place to put in a phone number that is optional, there is no explanation of why the phone number would be desired. Maybe it was just so that someone could call you and respond to you directly about any

**Resources:  
Sample  
Documents**

[Sidewalk  
Questionnaire](#)

Tools of the  
Trade: Survey  
Monkey

questions or suggestion you provided in #19. Maybe it was to obtain information that could be used to find out who you were. No one knows given the way the question was written.

*Sidewalk Questionnaire:* The sidewalk questionnaire has many of the same pitfalls found in the Historic District Survey. I will try to keep this more of a summary rather than boring people with all of the details noted above. The topic for the questionnaire was whether or not sidewalks should be required in new developments (we're talking about a Town with a population of more than 20,000 here). (Please click on the link in the left column to see a copy of the survey).

About the best think that I can think of to say about this particular survey is "Just who in the heck was the person writing this survey for?" I know it was intended for the general public, but is it really likely that the general public will understand all of the terms used here.

### **Options**

If you are going to claim that your agency practices open government and is taking steps to be inclusive of citizens, then you need to give citizens tools that allow them to not only participate, but to participate in an effective manner. Don't go to the time and trouble of creating a survey that is not going to be useful. The data from both of these surveys is, because of the questions, highly likely to create a distorted view of what citizens want. Of course, that requires that citizens are brave enough to take a stab at a survey that they likely do not understand. If you want a quick way to evaluate a survey, that might just give you some valid feedback, then take the time to test the survey on a sample of your proposed population. It really isn't much different than taking the time to make sure your vehicle has gas in it BEFORE getting on the Interstate to start a Cross-County trip.

Whether the cause for poorly designed surveys is ignorance or intent doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. What matters is that the data from the survey is not likely to accurately reflect the desires/thoughts of citizens. This sets up a situation where decisions made, based upon the survey data, results in a the public hearings on the ordinance where chaos abounds. Or, even worse, after the ordinance is passed, citizens, who may well have had a clear understanding of what they perceived the questions to be, discover that the final outcome is totally different. That will have repercussions far into the next few election cycles.

So, what is a person to do? If inadequacies in the process are due to ignorance, you find a way to compensate for that. Either you hire someone to design surveys for you; you take the steps to see that you have someone "in-house" who gets the necessary training; or you make use of some of the resources that are now available via the computer and the internet to learn about surveys and to design effective ones. However, the most cost effective and efficient way to create usable surveys is to work with one of the online survey tools now available. Programs like SurveyMonkey make designing and administering surveys far easier than even a couple of years ago.

### **Rules of the Game: Basic Advice for Creating a Good Survey**

I want to start with some basic advice about how to create an effective survey, one that avoids the pitfalls of the two examples used later in this article.

1. *What is the primary question you wish to have answered?*

In order for a survey begin life, it must be designed to answer some specific

question/need. Surveys are used to elicit input for complex and often politically sensitive issues. The survey can be composed of 5 or 50 questions, but all of those must tie back into this primary question. The primary question can not be answered with a simple yes or no. If it could, there would be no need to go through the survey process.

Primary questions typically center on one of three questions:

- How much support is there for “X”?;
- What does the public support? need? want?; and
- Why are some programs or policies popular or unpopular?

*2. Identify your audience, those from whom you wish to elicit responses.*

If you are going to elicit information from a specific sub-group of the jurisdiction or hoping to gain input from the general public, you have to have some idea of the average education level and the level of knowledge that those participants have on the topic being presented. Think in terms of how the actual issues being addressed in the survey may affect different neighborhoods or groups of people. Will it have a different impact on residents than on businesses? Do people understand the full scope of the issue? How familiar are they with the terminology of the specific area of the questions such as planning, engineering, erosion and sediment control, or even "historic district" or zoning types?

If you are using a cover sheet or lead-in paragraphs, this is the perfect time to let the reader know how many questions are in the survey and how much time it is likely to take to complete it. This helps to reduce frustration by allowing readers to select a time to do the survey that does not interfere with other activities.

*3. Stop and take some time to make a list of how "you" feel about the issue.*

Identifying your own potential of bias is the best way to keep it from appearing in the questions that you pose to citizens. If you are a citizen who is taking it upon yourself to take on a project like a survey or questionnaire in order to provide information to your local government, then do the same thing. This will help you to keep your own emotions, values, and beliefs from guiding the responses received.

*4. Keep the survey/questionnaire short.*

Nothing will turn people off like having multiple pages to have to deal with, whether printed or on the internet. Start by keeping your demographic questions as few as possible. Once you have written out your list of questions pertaining to the issue/topic, review them to see if there is any redundancy or if it is possible to condense two or more questions into one rephrased question. The longer the survey, the more likely people will choose not to complete it or will only partially complete it. It is likely that those who do take the time to complete the longer survey are those who are most interested in or affected by the issue resulting in data that is skewed towards those people's responses.

## Online Resources:

Harvard University: [Types of Survey Questions](#) (pdf)

University of Texas: [Survey Question Types](#) (pdf)

CVent: [Guide to the Five Types of Survey Questions](#)

QuestionPro: [Survey Questions and Answer Types](#)

Research Methods Knowledge Base: [Types of Questions](#)

SuperSurvey Knowledge Base: [Survey Questions](#)

Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE): [Types of Survey Questions](#) (pdf)

## Resources:

A Brief Introduction to Content Analysis

5. *Avoid using technical terms/jargon wherever possible. Clearly define your terms when you can't.*

Don't assume knowledge. If you MUST use such terms then take the time to explain them so that every respondent will have a clear understanding of what the question is really asking.

6. *Choose questions that are important to all participants.*

Those people who are most directly affected are more likely to understand the question from a common perspective. Depending upon how the question is phrased, it is possible that any given question can mean something different to different readers. Be sure to phrase the questions in such a way as to prevent there being multiple meanings within the group of respondents. In many cases, it may be necessary to educate the public on the issue prior to releasing the survey. This will help insure that people more fully understand the questions and can give more accurate responses.

7. *Choose questions that have short answers.*

The longer the answer the more opportunity for misinterpretation or for the respondent to get off track from the core of the question. Some may wish to provide more information and you can simply note that they can send any supplement information in as a separate page.

8. *Please make sure that you know the difference between "Closed-ended" and "Open-ended" questions.*

Both open-ended and closed questions should be used in a survey; however, how and where they are used is crucial.

"Closed-ended" questions are designed to elicit specific facts, and allow no opportunity for the respondent to give conditional information that may be even more relevant than simply the facts. Typically, closed-ended questions ask respondents to choose from a pre-selected range of responses (check one) and produce "quantitative data" (nice neat numbers that lend themselves to easily calculated percentages). "Closed-ended" questions keeps control of the dialog entirely in the hands of the person asking the question thus providing the perfect opportunity for the question writer to drive the responses to a desired outcome.

Open-ended questions produce qualitative data, or data defined by words or by non-predetermined categories. They can be either short answer (What is or was your profession?) or long answer (What are the three biggest issues facing jurisdiction X?). "Open-ended" questions are those which encourage the respondent to think for him/her self, to form his/her own opinion, and respond in whatever fashion and with whatever terms they see fit. This is where you can really begin to understand how the issue affects people. Emotions come into play and you can determine how strongly someone feels about something. In this case, it is the respondent who is in control rather than the question writer. The information you get is likely to be both more precise and more detailed, but coding the response also takes significantly more time. The results, however, are worth the investment.

9. *Get second opinions.*

Once you have completed a draft version of your survey, find someone who represents your audience in education and level of expertise on the topic and have them review the survey. In fact, have several such individuals review it and ask them to give you feedback on the survey. This will help make sure that your audience will actually understand the questions and you can make changes before the survey is distributed.

10. *Be honest in your evaluation of the data.*

Do not throw out those answers that you don't agree with or that don't support your position. As a rule of thumb, all responses should be entered into the survey database verbatim. Do not change people's words, regardless of your intentions. There are two cases when omission is allowed in the final reports: 1) Non-publicly acceptable language, and 2) direct attacks on specific persons. In cases where an author includes phrases or terms that do not pass the basic muster, the phrases are included in the database of responses, but are edited for any and all public reports, replaced with a short phrase enclosed in brackets that explains the deletion: [name deleted]. If you are releasing the "raw data" to the public, the same level of editing is required. Personal attacks and swearing have no place in public surveys.

11. *Let the results of the survey be known to the public.*

This shows people that you take their input seriously and that each voice in the process is important. Doing a survey and not letting people see the data gives the impression that you really didn't want to know the answers they provided.

12. *Do not predetermine the outcome.*

I will add this one last, but it is probably the most important of the rules that I use when I look at a survey. DO NOT decide on the answer that you want and then build questions to give you that answer. Whether by accident or intent, this is probably the most common abuse I have observed in surveys. Leading questions are those that tend to direct a respondent's answer by the words chosen to ask or to answer the question. Make sure that your word choices maintain a balance and are not likely to elicit an emotional charged response to key words and catchy phrases. Do not provide additional information in specific answers, be sure you give all the information needed in the question text itself. Where lists are used, use a random ordering system to make sure that you don't end up with the top few responses being the most likely chosen.