

# Survey Question Considerations

## Department of Student Life Studies

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Although surveys can be quick and easy to administer, time and attention should be given in the planning process. Poorly written survey questions may produce worthless information. On the other hand, a well-planned survey can gather useful information, provide a professional image of your organization to the respondents, and provide a positive survey taking experience.

When creating a survey and its questions, **think about the respondents** and how they will react to the questions. In today's busy times, participants want to be able to complete a survey to the best of their ability in the shortest time possible. Therefore, it's incredibly important to create an easy to read, easy to answer, and short survey.

To create the best survey possible, first **clearly articulate the purpose of the survey**. How are you going to use the information you receive? What information do you need (vs. want)? Is a survey the best method to obtain the information? Is the information available elsewhere? Who has the information you need (define your target audience)?

Second, **articulate the purpose and use of each question**. If the question is unclear or will not answer your overall purpose, then consider not asking the question.

Fowler (1995) defined five goals in writing good survey questions:

1. **Define the objective of the question**—For each question, determine why you are asking it, how it relates to the purpose of the survey, and how you are going to use the information.
2. **Define concepts and terms so that respondents have a common understanding of the question**—Avoid vague language, which may mean having longer questions or instructions.
3. **Ask questions that respondents can answer**—Participants may have a hard time remembering mundane events or very detailed information over a long period of time.
4. **Specify the answer options so respondents can respond to the question**—Specify a time period if applicable, and make sure the response categories are clear and applicable.
5. **Minimize social desirability**—Reduce too-detailed answers, assure respondents that a behavior is natural or commonplace, and ensure anonymity or confidentiality

See Student Life Studies' "[Tips on Writing Good Survey Questions](#)" for more detailed information on question development. Contact the Department for your assessment needs at [sls@tamu.edu](mailto:sls@tamu.edu).

Fowler, F. J. (1995) *Improving Survey Questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.