

Planning a Survey

Introduction

In some disciplines it will make sense to use a standard survey that has been validated by others. In that case you will just need to consider how you will collect your own responses. Otherwise, you will need to design your own questionnaire and this resource is designed to provide some general guidelines to help you.

If you need **ethics approval** before conducting the survey, check the advice you have been given on this.

A key thing to keep in mind is that your survey should help you to answer your **research questions** so make sure that you are clear about what it is you are trying to find out. You need to consider why you are asking each question and how you will analyse the responses. To encourage participation, you should try to keep your survey as short as is practical.

Always check that your supervisor is happy with your survey before you start collecting responses. It is also a good idea to **pilot** the survey with some 'critical friends' before distributing it widely.

Questions - General

For each question consider:

- Why are you asking this question?
- What kind of answers do you want?
- How will you analyse the results?
- Will you make an answer compulsory, or can participants skip the question?

Remember that the type of question you use will affect the type of variable that the responses provide and so how you can analyse your data.

The start of the survey

- You need to **introduce** your survey to the participants explaining why you are carrying it out and how long it is likely to take to complete. Any ethical considerations (e.g. confidentiality) should be made clear in the introduction.
- If you want to exclude some people from your research, make sure they have the option to stop early in the survey by including a **filter question**. (e.g. Are you a Middlesex student?)
- Anyone reading your results will want to know something about the people who responded to your survey so you will probably want to include some questions on the **demographics** of your sample (e.g. age, gender, nationality). However, you should only ask for information which is relevant. Avoid asking possibly sensitive

questions unless they are pertinent to your research. (e.g. religion, sexual orientation.)

- If you want your survey to be **anonymous**, make sure that your respondents will not feel that your questions will help you identify them.

Exact numbers or ranges

Do you need to know an exact answer (for instance a participant's age or salary) or will knowing that the value is in a given range be enough?

- Exact values
 - Give you a scale variable with more options for analysis.
- Ranges
 - Give you an ordinal variable with fewer options for analysis.
 - Can be more appropriate if the question might be sensitive or difficult to answer exactly.

If you decide to use ranges, think about what ranges to choose and why. Make sure your ranges do not overlap.

Open or closed questions

Think about whether you want to ask an **open** question (participants can write in their answer) or a **closed** one (participants are given options to choose from).

- Open questions
 - Can be harder to analyse as you may have a wide range of responses – and different ways of giving essentially the same response (or different spellings) can cause problems.
 - Are useful if you want to see what participants can recall without prompts. (e.g. Which brands of X can you name?)
 - Give participants the chance to have their say – and you might be able to quote them in your report.
 - Might provide deeper insights.
- Closed questions
 - Can be easier to analyse.
 - Provide prompts. (e.g. Which of these brands of X have you bought?)

If you decide to use a closed question with several options:

- Make it clear whether participants can choose more than one option.
- Check that every participant will be able to choose one of the options – do you need to include 'other' or 'not applicable'?
- Use the responses from your pilot to edit the options if necessary.

Wording Your Questions

You want to make it easy for participants to complete your survey.

- Try to avoid questions that might be **ambiguous**.
 - Think about whether your participants will have the same understanding of terms as you do.
 - Be aware of international/cultural differences in language and attitudes.
- Avoid questions that are **difficult** to answer.
 - What is it reasonable to expect someone to remember or calculate?
 - Be careful with negatives. (e.g. Do you agree that the company should not...?)
 - Avoid double-barrelled questions. (e.g. I agree that my team leader is approachable and efficient.)
- Avoid **leading** questions. (e.g. Do you agree that Middlesex is the best...?)
- Be clear about whether you are asking for an opinion or for factual information.

Using Ratings

- You might want to include a question which asks the participants to rate a statement using a **Likert scale** (Strongly agree, agree etc).
 - Think about how many options you want.
 - Do you want a neutral option or to force the participants to express an opinion?
 - The answers would usually be considered to give an ordinal variable, but some consider the variable to be scale if there are 7 or more options.
- Other questions might ask for a rating on a numerical scale.
 - Think about why you have chosen a particular range. How granular do you need the responses to be?
 - Be aware that a rating of 7/10 might be interpreted differently in different contexts.
 - Be very clear whether a high number is 'good' or 'bad'.
 - Responses are usually considered to give a scale variable.

If you have several questions using the same rating scale, you may be able to combine them into a grid.

Putting the survey together

- Think about which **order** to ask the questions.
- Do you want to give **different routes** through the survey? (For instance, "If you have answered 'No' go to Question 4".) Online survey tools may allow you to automate this.
- Include a **Thank You** message at the end, along with any further information for the participants.

Distributing your survey

Once you are happy with your survey think about how you will distribute it and how the method you use might affect your sample.

- Collecting the results in person will mean that you can explain your questions, if necessary, but the respondents cannot be completely anonymous.
- Online surveys can be anonymous and quick. If you want to use an online survey tool, check what is available to you as a Middlesex student. Find out how you can extract the data afterwards.
- Think about how you will encourage people to complete the survey and what kind of sample you want.