



Designing Quality Survey Questions

Short talk handout

A stylized icon of a person's head and shoulders, composed of a dark blue circle for the head and a teal shape for the torso, with an orange shape extending from the side.

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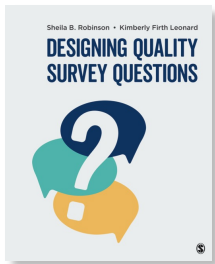
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Decades ago, Floyd Fowler, a preeminent survey researcher declared,



“...the design and evaluation of survey questions is the most fertile current methodological area for improving survey research. Poor question design is pervasive, and improving questions design is one of the easiest, most cost effective steps that can be taken to improve the quality of survey data. (1995, p. vii).

And that's why we're here...



The book:

Robinson, S.B. & Leonard, K.F. (2019). [Designing Quality Survey Questions](#). SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Why focus on survey design?

- Surveys are inherently imperfect tools and can quite easily be fraught with error.
- Self-reports are problematic.
- Surveys are often developed without enough study or practice.
- Surveys developed internally are increasingly common and require extra attention.
- Question wording can dramatically impact responses and data quality.
- Today's survey researcher must work to ensure cultural relevance.
- Survey fatigue and non-response negatively impact data collection.

-Robinson, S.B. & Leonard, K.F. (2019). *Designing Quality Survey Questions*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Purposeful survey design process

1. Planning and predrafting

- a. Determining and articulating survey purpose
- b. Understanding what surveys can measure
- c. Understanding survey respondents

2. Developing questions

- a. Sourcing questions
- b. Crafting question stems and response options

3. Finalizing

- a. Pretesting
- b. Preparing for administration, analysis, and use

-Robinson, S.B. & Leonard, K.F. (2019). *Designing Quality Survey Questions*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Quotes & Notes:

The first thing you learn is that there is no right way to ask a question.



– Paul Peterson, editor-in-chief, Education Next

It is futile to search for truly neutral questions. They don't exist.

–Clark, H. H., & Schober, M. F. (1992). Asking questions and influencing answers. In J. M. Tanur (Ed.), Questions about questions: Inquiries into the cognitive bases of surveys (pp. 15–48). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

How evaluators ask a question can dramatically influence the answers they receive... Minor changes in question wording, format, or order can profoundly affect results.

–Schwarz, N., & Oyserman, D. (2001). Asking questions about behavior: Cognition, communication, and questionnaire construction. American Journal of Evaluation, 22(2), 127–160.

In posing a behavioral question, researchers implicitly hope that participants will...

- *Understand the question*
- *Identify the behavior of interest*
- *Retrieve relevant instances of the behavior from memory*
- *Correctly identify the relevant reference period*
- *Search this reference period to retrieve all relevant instances of the behavior*
- *Correctly date the recalled instances of the behavior to arrive at a frequency report*
- *Correctly add up all the instances to determine whether they fall within the reference period*
- *Map this frequency onto the response alternatives*
- *Candidly provide the result of their recall effort to the researcher*

–Schwarz, N., & Oyserman, D. (2001). Asking questions about behavior: Cognition, communication, and questionnaire construction. American Journal of Evaluation, 22(2), 127–160.

Articles & Interviews:

- [My articles on survey design](#)
- [Survey Design with Sheila B. Robinson on the Glass Frog Podcast](#)
- [Human-Centered Design Thinking Approach to Survey Development and Use with Sheila Robinson](#) (interview with Dr. James Pann)
- [Maximize Your Survey Response Rates: Expert Insights from Sheila B. Robinson](#) (interview with Dr. James Pann)
- [How We Undercounted Evictions By Asking the Wrong Questions](#)
- [A Tale of Two Polls](#)



Tips from the research on survey design...

Survey design advice based on insights from research studies:

1. Ensure all survey items are in **plain language**, free from jargon or complex wording that may interfere with understanding. Use retrieval cues to help jog respondents' memories.
2. Ensure question stems and response options **match**.
3. Use **"item-specific" (aka "construct-specific") response option scales** vs "Agree-disagree" scales. (If the item is supposed to measure satisfaction, responses should use the word "satisfaction"; if the item is supposed to measure important, response should use the word "importance.")
4. For most survey items, **use 4-11 scale points**. Use an even number of points when you're sure people will feel one way or the other (positive or negative); use an odd number when it's possible people may feel truly "neutral" or "undecided" or "neither." Positive and negative response options should be equal in number regardless of the number of response options provided.
5. To the extent possible, **verbally label** all scale points (it is increasingly difficult to verbally label scales with more than 7 points).
6. To the extent possible **use individual YES/NO items rather than "check all that apply."**
7. In most cases, **avoid ranking questions**.



Sheila B. Robinson, Ed.D., of [Custom Professional Learning, LLC](#) is a speaker, educator, and consultant with a passion for the science of teaching and learning, presentations, and asking questions. Through her talks, professional development workshops and university courses, Sheila teaches people how to make the most of professional learning and how to ask good questions, along with program evaluation, survey design, data visualization, audience engagement, and presentation design.

Sheila is also a Certified Presentation Specialist (CPS)[™], Vice President of the Presentation Guild, and Senior Design and Facilitation Consultant with Evergreen Data.

Some of my other courses...



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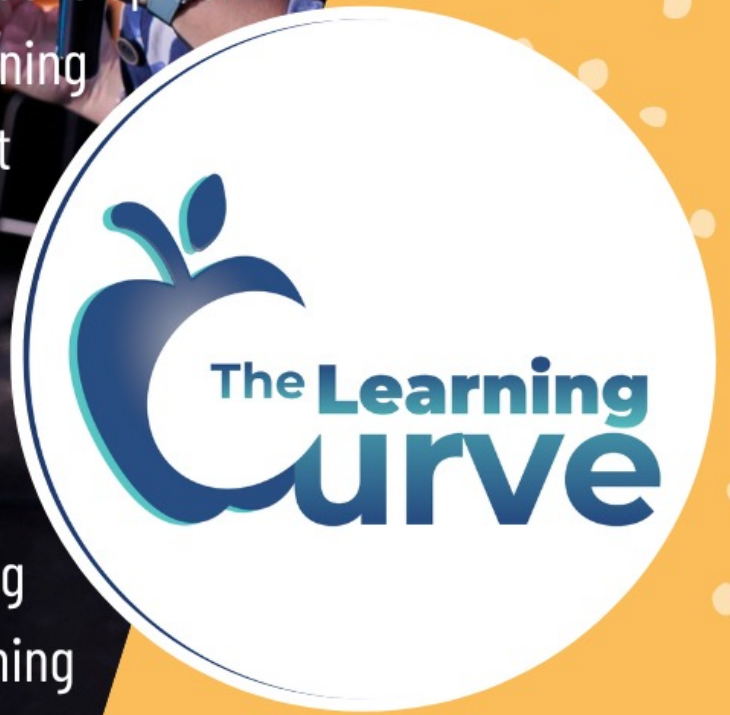
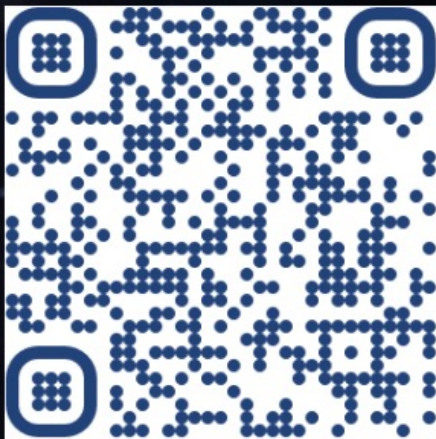
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