



Writing Survey Questions for Local Program Evaluations

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Introduction

Surveys are commonly used for evaluating programs and participants (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006). Surveys can provide immediate and relevant programmatic information. They can identify what participants liked, what aspects of the program did not work, and how future programming can be improved. Collecting evaluation information also demonstrates to the participants that their input is valued by program stakeholders (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2000).

There are many published and well-established instruments that measure specific outcomes and constructs (e.g., depression, anxiety, and relationship satisfaction). However, there are few generally-accepted questionnaires that measure “process” and “implementation” aspects of programming. When evaluating a local program, evaluators may want or need to construct their own questionnaire that is tailored to their specific needs, resources, and reporting requirements. Writing good survey questions that truly provide the desired information can be difficult (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). An evaluator should identify the specific information that is of interest before selecting a pre-existing battery of questions or writing new questions. This factsheet provides information about effectively collecting evaluation information through surveys and considers:

- Existing measures
- Closed-ended questions
- Open-ended questions
- Tips for success

Existing Measures

Program evaluations may utilize a pre-existing battery of questions or measurement tools to evaluate outcomes and capture participant feedback. Several tools have been developed and can be accessed through university libraries or directly from the developers of the measure. Existing measures should be judged by their relevance, reliability (accuracy of the measurement), and validity (ability to capture what it is supposed to measure) (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009).

Closed-ended Questions

Closed-ended questions are commonly found on surveys. This type of questioning provides a selection of possible answers from which participants can pick (Dillman et al., 2009). Quantitative data is collected using this form of questioning. The data that is collected tends to be straightforward and can be easily entered into a statistical program for analysis. A major advantage is that evaluation results can be produced promptly (Dillman et al., 2009). The answer format that is selected for a closed-ended question should be based on how the information will be used after it is collected. Closed-ended questions can take the form of multiple-choice, yes/no, true/false, or checklist formats.

For example, the following question could be asked as a true/false question (providing participants with two response options). In order to

capture a greater range of responses the same question could be answered on a five point scale.

Question: As a result of participating in this workshop, my knowledge of healthy relationships improved.

Response option A (True/False)

☐	☐
False	True

Response option B (Scale)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Important considerations when developing closed-ended questions include:

- **Inclusive answer categories.** When providing the respondent with answers to the question, careful consideration must be given to include all reasonably possible answers (Dillman et al., 2009). If the respondent does not see their answer as an option they may skip over the question. For example, if the goal is to find out where a participant heard about the program, all possible answers should be listed (e.g., word-of-mouth, television, radio, a previous course, an email list, etc.). An “other” category can be included to capture less common possibilities.
- **Mutually exclusive response options.** Response options should be well-defined and distinct (Dillman et al., 2009). For example, a 30 or 40 year-old would have difficulty deciding which age group to select if the options were 20-30, 30-40, and 40-50. More appropriate response categories would be 21-30, 31-40, and 41-50.

Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions are typically followed by an answer box (Dillman et al., 2009). This type of questioning allows the participant to freely share the information he or she feels is important or relevant. Open-ended questions can provide rich and detailed information. The participants are not

limited to specific options. The data that is collected is qualitative. Qualitative data provides in-depth information but, may require timely coding and analyzing procedures (Dillman et al., 2009). Some important considerations when using open-ended questions include:

- **Don’t close the question.** Open-ended questions are designed to gather detailed information. The wording of the question should lead to an explanation rather than a one-word response (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). An example of a “closed” open-ended question would be: “Did you learn something new?” The respondent could answer in one word providing little detail. One way of transforming this question into an open question could be, “Explain what you learned from attending this program.”
- **Adequate response space.** In order to gather descriptive responses, participants will need space to write (Dillman et al., 2009). The size of the response box tells the participant the length of response the evaluators are looking for. A smaller box will produce a shorter response.
- **Extra motivation to respond.** Open-ended questions require deeper thinking and time commitments from the participants. This may lead participants to skip or not respond to these questions. One way to increase response rate is to include clarifying or motivating language (Dillman et al., 2009). For example, “In your own words, how would you explain your experience in the program? This question is very important to us and will inform future services we offer. Please take your time in answering it.”

Tips for Success

- **Ask one question at a time.** Double-barreled items are problematic because they ask participants about two or more ideas in one question (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). Effective survey items only contain one idea in each question (Dillman et al., 2009; Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). An item that asks a participant to agree or disagree with this statement, “I am satisfied with the program and I learned about healthy relationships,” is really asking two separate questions (satisfaction with the program and

learning something about relationships). If both questions are important, the evaluator may include two different questions on the survey.

- **Consider reading level.** When writing questions there may be a tendency to use technical language or fancy words (Dillman et al., 2009). It is important to consider the participants and their reading levels (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). Use common language and write out abbreviations that may not be common knowledge.
- **Short and simple.** Try to keep questions short and to the point (Dillman et al., 2009, Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). Longer items can be confusing and misleading. Questions should be written in complete sentences (Taylor-Powell, 1998).
- **Question is consistent with response options.** Make sure the response options make sense with the question (Dillman et al., 2009).
- **Word questions both positively and negatively.** Some participants may look at a long survey and just fill in answers without carefully reading each question (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). One way to identify this pattern is to alternate positively and negatively worded questions. For example, “I felt dissatisfied with the program” and “I felt the program was worth my time.” The first represents a negatively worded item and the second represents a positively worded item.
- **Putting it all together.** Once questions have been written they should be organized in a logical flow (Taylor-Powell, 1998). Questions about similar subjects are generally placed close together. The questions should be typed in a font that is clear and easy to read.
- **Pre-test the questions.** Have colleagues, or a sample from the population of interest, review the questions. Ask them to provide feedback about any of the questions that may be unclear or confusing (Taylor-Powell, 1998; Taylor-Powell & Hermann, 2000).

Conclusion

Surveying program participants is a common way to collect program evaluation

information. This information can lead to program improvement and provide data for publication and reports. Depending on the needs of the program, stakeholders and evaluators may choose to develop their own surveys or use existing measures. Careful forethought in question development can lead to more meaningful results. Regardless of how questions are developed, where they come from, or what they are about, they should always be reviewed and approved by the sponsoring University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board before they are utilized in an evaluation.

References

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