

Best Practice in Surveys Guidance

How to design an effective online survey

Prepare your survey in advance

Do a complete outline of your survey in a text editor before even logging in to an online survey tool, such as the [Bristol Online Survey](#), to start building it. This will give you the opportunity to consider the wording of each question, the full set of responses, possible ambiguities in questions and the overall structure of a survey. Good structural design is important in any survey. Make sure the questionnaire is interesting and topical and one that participants will want to complete. Ensure you pilot the survey in advance.

Keep survey size to a minimum

The simple fact is the bigger your survey is the less likely respondents will be to complete it. Does the questionnaire already exist, or must you create one? Check the [University's survey wiki](#) to see if previous research will give you the answers you require. If you must create another survey, then pare down your survey so that you ask the crucial questions that you want answers to, and get rid of questions that are really supplemental to your current research aims. You can always add a question at the end, asking respondents if they would mind taking part in further surveys, and send them out supplemental surveys at a later date. Streamlined surveys get the best results.

Structure your surveys into logical chunks

Give your survey a good structure. On the first page, make it clear what the aim of the survey is. Generally, keep personal identification questions to the end. Above all, break your survey up into logically ordered pages. This helps you group relevant questions together, makes the survey less daunting (one long page can be extremely off-putting to respondents), and also gives you flexibility in creating conditional pages, which will not show questions that are irrelevant to certain respondents.

Don't confuse multiple and single choice options

A common mistake in survey design is using a multiple choice question style for a question where you are only seeking a single answer. Think carefully for each question whether you want respondents to select just a single option, or whether you want to leave open the possibility of several responses. For example, consider the difference between these two questions:

- What age group do you fall in? 15-25, 26-45, 46-65, 66+ (single choice)

- What continents have you holidayed on? Europe, Americas, Africa, Asia, Oceania, None (multiple choice)

Use images sparingly

When using images in surveys, use them sparingly! The University logo at the top of a survey can give it authority, and multiple choice image questions, where appropriate, make the survey more interesting for respondents. If the Survey is supported by the Students' Union, request to use their logo alongside that of the institution. Make sure you resize large graphics to smaller, more easily downloadable sizes. Check to see if your survey provider allows you to resize images that you've uploaded, rather than having to adjust them in software like Photoshop.

Be aware of copyright and data protection laws!

You don't need to be an expert on copyright or data protection laws, but you must always bear in mind that anything you include in your survey and any data you gather should pay due respect to the law. Do not infringe copyright on images, nor include anything that is potentially libellous. If you are collecting personal data, be aware of the data protection act, and ask for any required permissions for any uses you may make of the data gathered. Ensure you state the appropriate assurances about confidentiality and anonymity in the survey. Have all ethical issues been explored? Does your survey need to be approved by the departmental or University Research Ethics Committee?

[The University's website has basic guidance on data protection for all members of University staff.](#)

Be courteous!

Remember that your respondents are doing you a favour by filling in your survey. It is a good idea to include a greeting message at the start of a survey that is brief, and explains the reason for the survey and, possibly, where results will be available. If you are asking for personal information, spell out exactly what your privacy policy is. A simple short thank-you message is always a good idea just before they submit.

Adapted from:

http://www.demographix.com/resources/online_survey_best_practice.asp

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Further advice and support can be found from a range of sources including:

- [Bristol Online Surveys](#)
- [Introduction to Questionnaire Design](#)
- [How might we achieve higher response rates on our Online Unit Evaluations?](#)