Elements of Quality Survey Design

1. Start with a salient/interesting question
2. Place items with same response categories in a series
   ◇ Group questions with same answer type on the same topic together into matrix questions
3. Keep objectionable/personal and open-ended questions until the end of the survey
4. List answer categories vertically rather than horizontally
5. Maintain consistency throughout survey in direction of scales displayed
6. Place instructions exactly where needed
7. Number questions simply and consecutively from beginning to end

Prepared by: Lisa O'Leary Shuler   Associate Director for Assessment and Evaluation   lols@mit.edu

Survey Question Types

Question Type	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Yes/No	Questions with two possible answers	Wide variety of data analyses	Provide limited information
Multiple Choice	Stem followed by set of answers, pick the option that best describes opinion	Easy to answer, collect factual information	Possibility of not including key response options
Likert Rating Scale	Determine where an answer fits on a scale of carefully ordered categories	Efficient means to information, comparisons among answers	Difficult to write unambiguous items, potential for biased results
Open-Ended	No formatted response options, compose own answer to a stem	Informative – learn about unanticipated topics or issues	Require more work/effort, time-consuming analysis

◆ Does the question require an answer?

◆ To what extent do respondents have a ready-made answer?

◆ Can respondents accurately recall and report past behaviors?

◆ Are respondents willing to reveal the information that you're asking for?

◆ Will respondents feel motivated to answer?

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10. Use simple as opposed to specialized terms

Exhausted	➡	Tired
Candid	➡	Honest
Top priority	➡	Most important
Leisure	➡	Free time
Employment	➡	Work
Courageous	➡	Brave
Rectify	➡	Correct

Dillman, D.A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method (2nd ed.)*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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9. Choose as few words as possible to pose the question

Problem: Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that service learning should be required for all MIT graduates?

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Revision: Which of the following best describes the extent to which you agree or disagree that service learning should be required for all MIT graduates?

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

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8. Avoid vague quantifiers when more precise estimates can be obtained

Problem: How often did you volunteer in the past year?

○ Never

○ Rarely

○ Occasionally

○ Regularly

Revision: How often did you volunteer in the past year?

○ More than once a week

○ About once a week

○ Two to three times a month

○ About once a month

○ A few times

○ Not at all

Adapted from: Dillman, D.A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method (2nd ed.).* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

7. **Soften the impact of potentially objectionable questions**

Problem: What was your total income from all sources in 2008?

Revision: Which of the following categories best describes your total income from all sources in 2008?

○ $10,000 or less

○ $10,001 to $20,000

○ $20,001 to $35,000

○ $35,001 to $50,000

○ $50,001 to $100,000

○ $100,001 or more

Adapted from: Dillman, D.A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method (2nd ed.).* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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6. Avoid asking respondents to say yes in order to mean no

Problem: Do you favor or oppose not allowing students to graduate without enrollment in two service learning classes?

◯ Favor

◯ Oppose

Revision: Do you favor or oppose requiring enrollment in two service learning classes in order to graduate?

◯ Favor requiring two service learning classes

◯ Oppose requiring two service learning classes

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5. **Develop response categories that are mutually exclusive**

Problem: From which one of these sources did you first learn about the Public Service Center (PSC)?

○ At orientation
○ In a class
○ Through an extra-curricular activity
○ Another student
○ A faculty member
○ A PSC staff member

Revision: In what setting did you first learn about the Public Service Center (PSC)?

○ At orientation
○ In a class
○ An extra-curricular activity

Revision: From which one of these sources did you first learn about the Public Service Center (PSC)?

○ Another student
○ A faculty member
○ A PSC staff member

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4. Eliminate check-all-that-apply question formats to reduce primacy effects

Problem: In the future, which of the following do you plan on participating (after you graduate from MIT)?

- ◯ Community service/volunteering
- ◯ Contributing to charitable organizations
- ◯ Participating in marches/demonstrations
- ◯ Voting
- ◯ Helping on a political campaign/campaigning

Revision: Please indicate if you plan on participating in each of the following activities in the future (after you graduate from MIT)?

	Yes	No
Community service/volunteering	◯	◯
Contributing to charitable organizations	◯	◯
Participating in marches/demonstrations	◯	◯
Voting	◯	◯
Helping on a political campaign/campaigning	◯	◯

Top 10 Question Writing Guidelines

3. Provide appropriate time references

Problem: During your four years at MIT, how many times did you participate in community service?

Revision: On average, how many times per month did you participate in community service during your four years at MIT?

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2. Use equal numbers of positive and negative categories for scaled questions

Problem: How satisfied have you been with the community service opportunities at MIT?

○ Very satisfied

○ Mostly satisfied

○ Somewhat satisfied

○ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

○ Dissatisfied

Revision: How satisfied have you been with the community service opportunities at MIT?

○ Very satisfied

○ Satisfied

○ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

○ Dissatisfied

○ Very dissatisfied

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1. Avoid double-barreled questions

Problem: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: MIT should create a new program for undergraduates that includes optional service learning components that are available for additional credit as add-ons to existing classes.

○ Strongly agree

○ Agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Revision: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
MIT should create a new program for undergraduates that includes optional service learning components as add-ons to existing classes.	○	○	○	○	○
MIT should create a new program for undergraduates that includes optional service learning components that are available for additional credit.	○	○	○	○	○

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