Tips for Writing Survey Questions

Tip	Why it matters
Use everyday vocabulary	Using simple, clear language will yield better data from your survey. If people don't understand exactly what you are trying to communicate, it is more likely that they will make mistakes or choose the wrong answers. Even worse, they may give up on your survey entirely!
Avoid jargon and acronyms	We use a lot of special terminology and jargon in libraries that makes sense to library staff but can confuse people taking our surveys. For example, use "library catalog" rather than "OPAC" and "checkout desk" rather than "circulation".
Avoid wording that is ambiguous or unclear	A key goal in writing survey questions is to ensure that questions are interpreted the same way by everyone who answers them. Otherwise, you won't be able to draw conclusions from the data you obtain. To help all respondents interpret a question in the same way, avoid wording that is confusing or ambiguous. Often, questions that are long and wordy are especially confusing to people taking the survey. Ask a colleague to review your draft questions and suggest ways to make them more clear.
Limit each question to a single thought or idea	A survey question sometimes has more than one thought or idea embedded in it. When that happens, respondents may answer one but not both parts. Or their answers for the first part may conflict with their answers for the second part leaving them unsure how to respond. For example: How often do you attend story time and puppet shows at the library? Perhaps a respondent attends story time once a week but only attends puppet shows once a year. If they aren't reading carefully, they might only answer the first part of the question and select "once a week". If they are reading more carefully, they will realize that their two answers conflict and will either need to guess or leave the question blank.
Ask mostly closed-ended questions	Closed-ended questions include a set of answer choices from which respondents choose. These questions yield data that is easy to quantify and analyze. Surveys typically rely on close-ended questions because the goal is to gather and consolidate data from a large number of people. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to write in their own answer. They yield richer and more varied data, and they are more difficult and time consuming to analyze. If you want to ask a lot of open-ended questions, consider conducting interviews since they allow you to explore your topic in more detail.

Tips for Writing Survey Questions

Tip	Why it matters
Avoid bias in the wording of your questions and answer choices	Biased questions lead your respondents to answer in a particular way. As a result, you won't get accurate data from your survey. Avoid revealing your own opinions in the survey question or referring to what "most people" think or believe since respondents may be inclined to answer in a way that agrees with those opinions. Also avoid biased adjectives and subjective statements. Instead, stick to simple, clear statements that are factually based. When appropriate, use survey software that allows you to randomize answer choices to avoid bias in the order of the answer choices.
Make sure there is an answer choice for everyone	It's important to include a comprehensive list of answer choices for each question so that every respondent can find the answer they need on the list. As you write your questions, think about different situations and circumstances that would influence respondents' answers. Try to think about people who will be an exception to the rule and include answer choices for them. Consider adding "None of the above" and "Other (specify)" choices to your list.
Make sure rating scales have an equal number of positive and negative choices	Rating scale questions ask respondents to rate a statement on a number scale or to indicate how the degree to which they agree with a statement. For example: How satisfied are you with the library's adult fiction collection? • Completely satisfied • Somewhat satisfied • Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied • Somewhat dissatisfied • Completely dissatisfied This example uses a rating scale that has two positive choices, two negative choices and one neutral choice. Since it has equal numbers of positive and negative choices, it is considered a balanced scale that doesn't bias the respondents to provide a positive answer or a negative answer. Experts differ on the importance of having a neutral answer choice.