



SurveyMonkey's Guide to Writing Survey Questions Like a Pro

Look no further for survey-writing tips, tricks, and best practices

Table of contents

| | | | |
|---|-----------|---|-----------|
| Introduction ----- | 3 | Unipolar vs. bipolar questions ----- | 15 |
| Why Surveys? ----- | 3 | Use yes/no questions cautiously ----- | 16 |
| Why a survey question-writing guide? ----- | 3 | Measuring “how much” ----- | 17 |
| Getting Started ----- | 4 | Watch your ranges ----- | 18 |
| Plan your survey ----- | 4 | Consider every option ----- | 19 |
| Set a goal ----- | 4 | Flow and Best Practices ----- | 20 |
| Ask yourself the big questions ----- | 4 | Require answers to all questions ----- | 20 |
| Determine your research questions ----- | 5 | Randomize answer choices when possible or relevant ---- | 20 |
| Narrow your focus ----- | 6 | Use a natural question flow ----- | 20 |
| Question Writing Dos and Don'ts ----- | 8 | The shorter, the better! ----- | 21 |
| Consider your respondents ----- | 8 | Make sure the right people take your survey ----- | 21 |
| Be clear ----- | 8 | Include titles if possible ----- | 22 |
| Keep it personal ----- | 9 | Use page breaks (and mile markers) sparingly ----- | 22 |
| Provide a time frame ----- | 10 | Limit matrix/grid questions ----- | 22 |
| Write unbiased questions ----- | 11 | Index of Terms and Resources ----- | 23 |
| Different Question Types and Responses ----- | 13 | | |
| Closed-ended vs. open-ended questions ----- | 13 | | |
| Try to limit them to one selection ----- | 14 | | |

If you see anything you want to learn more about, visit the last page for the [“Index of Terms and Resources”](#) to find links to articles explaining the concepts covered in this guide.

Introduction

Why Surveys?

Think about some of the decisions you've made in the past week. Chances are, deciding what to eat for lunch yesterday didn't take much deliberation. But it could have if that lunch included 20 people, and you needed to accommodate everybody's preferences, dietary restrictions, and schedules.

Surveys are wonderful because you can use them for just about anything, including planning an event or collecting feedback from customers, consumers, neighbors, students, patients, and almost anybody you can think of. And any decision—from what to eat for lunch to what you need to do to [manage your brand image](#)—can be an informed one when you ask people what they think.

Why a survey question-writing guide?

At SurveyMonkey, we don't stop at giving you the tools to create a survey. We also believe in helping you use them in a way that's going to get you the reliable data you need to make decisions, big or small.

Creating and sending out a survey—as well as analyzing and reporting on the results—isn't just a task: It's a journey. This question-writing guide helps you with one part of this journey. Namely, from setting a goal for your survey to writing survey questions that yield data you can count on. We've even included a few survey design best practices for good measure.

For a full list of articles on getting surveys right from start to finish, [visit our Surveys 101 resource center](#).

Getting Started

Plan your survey

Although the example survey questions in this guide touch on different topics, let's take a look at one scenario in which you own an ice cream shop and you want to collect customer feedback that will inform how you run your business.

There are so many questions you could ask customers. Do you want to know about the quality of the ice cream? How satisfied customers are with your staff? The cleanliness of your store? As you can see, there's a ton of ground to cover—and you don't want to miss out on asking the right questions. So where do you begin?

Set a goal

Before you start asking specific questions, it's a good idea to set a goal for your survey. What do you want to know? And why? As the owner of an ice cream shop, your survey goal could look like this:

Your Goal: Get feedback from your customers to assess your shop's strengths and weaknesses—so you can give customers an even better experience.

Make sure you keep your goal in mind while you're writing your survey questions. That way, you won't stray from the purpose of your survey and you can make sure every question helps you reach your goal.

Ask yourself the big questions

Once you know why you want to create your survey, ask yourself these top-level questions that will help you determine which survey questions to ask:

What are the questions I want to answer? What do I want to learn?

Who is my target population—that is, who should take my survey? What demographic groups do I want to look for within my pool of survey respondents?

If you apply these questions to your ice cream shop survey, you may end up with answers like these:

What: Do people enjoy their experience at my ice cream shop overall? What, specifically do they like? Dislike? Do they have any recommendations about how I can improve my shop?

Who: I want to send my survey to customers who have visited my shop. This population can be broken up into a few demographic groups: first-time customers, one-time customers, and returning customers.

Getting Started

Determine your research questions

Now use the answers to your top-level questions to write your research questions:

| Top-Level Question | Research Question(s) |
|------------------------------|---|
| What do I want to learn? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do customers rate my ice cream shop overall?• What parts/aspects of my ice cream shop do customers like best?• What parts/aspects of my ice cream shop need to be improved? |
| Who is my target population? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do the answers to the above differ between returning customers, first-time customers, and one-time customers (i.e., those who say they won't visit my shop again). |

Keep these question

Getting Started

Narrow your focus

Next, extract topics from your research questions and break them into subtopics:


| Research Question | Topic(s) | Subtopic(s) |
|--|--|---|
| How do customers rate my ice cream shop overall? | Overall rating | Satisfaction |
| What parts/aspects of my ice cream shop do customers like the best? What needs to be improved? | Parts/aspects of shop that customers like and/or need to be improved | Flavor selection Ice cream quality Service Location Cleanliness Décor Price Availability |
| How do the answers to the questions above differ among demographic groups of customers? | Who visited my shop | First-time customers Returning customers One-time customers |

▶ Getting Started

And now you can use your subtopics to write your survey questions. Remember: These questions aren't set in stone. Creating a list of these questions just helps you stay organized and focused—so

you can make sure you gather the evidence you need to reach your goal Here are just a few sample survey questions:


| Subtopic(s) | Survey Question(s) |
|----------------------|--|
| Satisfaction | Overall, how satisfied are you with our ice cream shop? |
| Ice cream quality | In general, how would you rate the quality of our ice cream? |
| Service | Were the staff at our ice cream shop friendly, or not? |
| First-time customers | How likely are you to visit our ice cream shop again? |

 **Pro Tip:** Having trouble writing questions? Use SurveyMonkey's [Question Bank](#) to choose from hundreds of pre-written, expert-certified questions!

Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

Consider your respondents

Once you've got your goal and a list of the questions you want to ask, you should make sure they're appropriate for the *who* of your survey—more specifically, the people who are going to take it. When you know who's going to take your survey, you can write your survey using language, examples, and definitions that cater to your population's knowledge and needs.

 **Pro Tip:** Speak their language: Generally, you should strive to write questions using language that is easily understood. Also think about what you can assume your respondents already know. Do they have knowledge of certain events, terms, and issues? The more you can focus on writing good questions, not explaining things, the better.

Regardless of who's taking your survey, use clear, concise, and uncomplicated language.

Be clear

Regardless of who's taking your survey, use clear, concise, and uncomplicated language and try to avoid acronyms, technical terms or jargon that may confuse your respondents. And make sure to provide definitions or examples if you need to include tricky terms or concepts. That way, you can be sure that almost anybody can answer your questions easily, and they'll be more inclined to complete your survey.

 **Avoid:** Do you own a tablet PC?

 **Use:** Do you own a tablet PC? (e.g. iPad, Android tablet)

 **Avoid:** What was the state of the cleanliness of the room?

 **Use:** How clean was the room?


Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

Keep it personal

Answering survey questions can be a little scary. Respondents may be intimidated by your survey if they don't think they're qualified to answer questions, or they might not feel comfortable sharing their true opinions.


If you want people to feel comfortable sharing opinions, regardless of their expertise or beliefs, make them feel at ease by setting the right tone. Use phrases like, "do you think," "do you feel," and "in your opinion," so that your respondents get the sense that you're really listening, and that your survey is not a quiz. It will help them share their opinion without feeling like they're taking a stance or risking being wrong.

 **Avoid:** Is the price of our ice cream too high, too low, or about right?

 **Use:** Do you feel that the price of our ice cream is too high, too low, or about right?

 **Avoid:** Which flavors of ice cream should our shop offer?

 **Use:** In your opinion, which flavors of ice cream should our shop offer?

 **Pro Tip:** When asking a potentially sensitive question like "Have you ever cheated on an exam?" make sure to assure respondents that their responses are completely confidential. It helps to make that clear in the survey's introduction. You can also help by pointing out that they'd have plenty of company whether or not they

had done the behavior in question. Here's an example: "In talking to people about cheating on tests, we've found that people often cheated on tests in school because they were too busy or tired to study. How about you? Have you ever cheated on a test, or not?"

Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

Provide a time frame

How many hours of TV do you watch?

Umm... when? Daily? Weekly? Make estimation easier by giving your respondents a time. Their answers will be better-informed, and your data will be better too.

⊘ Avoid: How much do you usually spend on groceries?

✔ Use: In the past week, about how much did you spend on groceries?

Also, use a time frame that makes it easy for respondents to come up with an answer. If you asked them, for example, how much they spent on groceries in the last year, it could be really hard for them to give you an accurate response if shopping for food is something they do each and every week.

⊘ Avoid: In the past year, how much did you spend on groceries?

✔ Use: In the past week, about how much did you spend on groceries?

And if you don't have a specific time period in mind, begin questions with "In general," "Overall," or "Typically," to be sure respondents are thinking about their behaviors on average. But be warned: These general questions can be more difficult for respondents to answer, which may yield less precise results.

✔ Pro Tip: Include your time frame up front for added emphasis and smoother question flow. Here are some examples of how you can begin your question with a specific time frame:

- Yesterday, did you...
- In the past week, have you...
- How many times in the past 30 days have you...
- In the next 12 months, will you...

A time frame makes it easier for respondents to come up with an answer.

Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

Write unbiased questions

Want high quality data that represents how your respondents truly feel? Read on to see five common mistakes that can lead to low quality results: leading, loaded, unbalanced, double-barreled, and confusing questions.

1. BEWARE: Leading questions

You want your respondent to make their own choices, so make sure you're not forcing their hand or influencing their answer with a leading question. (One that implies that there is a single, "right" answer.)

⊘ Avoid: Does our excellent new online shopping service make your life more convenient?

✔ Use: How do you feel about our new online shopping service?

2. BEWARE: Loaded questions

Make sure your personal opinions don't sneak into your questions—biased questions can influence your respondents' answers, especially if they contain loaded language that may produce strong connotations or emotions with respondents.

⊘ Avoid: In the past week, how many hours did you waste watching TV?

✔ Use: In the past week, how many hours of TV did you watch?

3. BEWARE: Double-barreled questions

Make sure you're only asking one question at a time! Look at this question:

Do you eat healthy foods and exercise every day?

What if your respondent only eats unhealthy food but they exercise each day? Or never exercise but love kale? Would they answer "yes" or "no"?

⊘ Avoid: Do you eat healthy foods and exercise every day?

✔ Use:

- In the past even days, how many days did you exercise?
- In the past seven days, how many days did you eat healthy foods?

See how we also used a relevant time frame?

Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

4. BEWARE: Unbalanced questions

Help your respondents feel comfortable expressing their opinion by including both sides in your question.

❌ **Avoid:** Do you like spinach?

✅ **Use:** Do you like spinach, or not?

✅ **Pro Tip:** In the above example, the question, “Do you like Spinach, or not?” is a *minimally balanced* question, meaning we’ve done the bare minimum to balance it. You can increase balance but sacrifice brevity—which is a good thing when it comes to question writing—by writing a *formally balanced* question: “Do you like spinach, or do you not like spinach?”

5. BEWARE: Overly broad questions

Imagine you want someone to respond to the question, “What do you think about our newspaper?” in a comment box.

What should they write about? The accuracy of reporting? The stories covered? The paper’s subscription price? If you want to get the information you’re looking for, be specific. And if you have several specific things you want to learn about (e.g., accuracy of reporting, topics covered) write one question for each of them.

❌ **Avoid:** What do you think about our newspaper?

✅ **Use:** How accurate is the reporting in our newspaper?

If you want to get the information you’re looking for, be specific when you write survey questions.

🔍 Different Question Types and Responses

Closed-ended vs. open-ended questions

When you want results that are easy to quantify, used *closed-ended questions* that ask your respondents to choose from pre-specified answer choices. These multiple-choice questions give results in terms of simple percentages (e.g. “62 percent of moms preferred brand X!”) that are more actionable and easier to share.

Example

What was the single most important reason you gave our ice cream shop a low rating?

- Price was too high
- Didn't like the ice cream taste
- Location isn't convenient for me
- Staff isn't friendly

On the flip side, open-ended questions ask respondents to answer in their own words. They give respondents the freedom to express themselves and share more thoughtful answers.

Example

What was the single most important reason you gave our ice cream shop a low rating? (Please write your answer in the box below.)

🌟 **Pro Tip:** When possible, we recommend using closed-ended questions because the responses from open-ended questions can be difficult to analyze—with answers had to classify. At the same time, we now have a Text Analysis feature that will help you make the most out of your open-ended feedback (available in our GOLD and PLATINUM plans).

🔍 Different Question Types and Responses

Try to limit them to one selection

Just like the responses you collect from open-ended questions, the answers to “Select all that apply” questions can be difficult to interpret. If someone picks three things, are they all equally important? When in doubt, keep respondents focused (and your results manageable) by limiting your use of questions that allow your respondents to check multiple boxes. Note that SurveyMonkey offers multiple choice and 14 other question types if you need them.

Use words, not numbers

“On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the worst ice cream you’ve ever tasted and 10 being the best, how much did you enjoy our ice cream?”

“Three.”

Wait—what does “three” mean? People tend to think in words, not numbers—so you should ask them to express their opinions with scales that use words.

Rating scales (also known as Likert scales) are methodologically-sound sets of answers that help you measure the frequency, intensity, amount, quality, and probability of your respondents’ attitudes and behaviors.

Example

How likely are you to eat our ice cream again?

- Extremely likely
- Very likely
- Moderately likely
- Slightly likely
- Not at all likely

Sure, you could use a rating scale based on a number from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely), but when you put answers in words, you reduce the ambiguity between what a 2 means to the respondent versus a 3.

To keep respondents focused, limit your use of questions that ask them to check multiple boxes.

Different Question Types and Responses

Unipolar vs. bipolar questions

But how many answer choices should there be when it comes to rating with words instead of numbers? Survey methodologists have spent a lot of time developing best practices. To save time and get you good results, here's what you need to know:

When you write a *unipolar* question that only asks your respondent to rate one attribute (like how enjoyable something is, or how comfortable or likely), a standard 5-point rating scale yields reliable estimates.

Example: Unipolar question (5-point)

How flavorful is our strawberry ice cream?

- Extremely flavorful
- Very flavorful
- Moderately flavorful
- Slightly flavorful
- Not at all flavorful

When you ask a *bipolar* question, you're asking someone to describe the intensity of their feelings based on two opposite dimensions (such as "like" and "dislike") of something, it's good to include a middle ("neutral") option and 1, 2, or 3 options on each side. If there are 2 options on each side, you would have a 5-point scale (including the neutral option). And 3 options on a side would give you a 7-point rating scale.

There is no single, superior number of points on a scale—and it's easier to think about odd-numbers—but too many points can make the decision hard for respondents. Basically, you should think about how much granularity a respondent can understand, and how much you want to be able to analyze at the end.

Example: Bipolar question (5-point)

Do you like the ice cream selection at our store, neither like it nor dislike it, or dislike it?

- Like a lot
- Like a little
- Neither like nor dislike
- Dislike a little
- Dislike a lot

🔍 Different Question Types and Responses

Use yes/no questions cautiously

Do you like to exercise? Yes or no? Chances are there are some days you do and other days you don't have the energy. But you can only pick one answer here. What should you say?

By making your respondents choose between "yes" and "no," you're asking them to think in black and white. That's not a good choice if your real aim is to understand shades of gray. So sometimes it's better to give them a little wiggle room by using a 5- or 7-point rating scale. It'll make your survey easier to answer when the choices aren't clear-cut to respondents.

⊘ **Avoid:** Will you visit our ice cream shop again?

- Yes
- No

✅ **Use:** How likely are you to visit our ice cream shop again?

- Extremely likely
- Very likely
- Moderately likely
- Slightly likely
- Not at all likely

✅ **Pro Tip:** A yes/no answer choice is a good thing when you're measuring something absolute. For example, there are no shades of gray when you ask someone

whether they own a dog. Yes/no answers can also be useful for qualifying potential survey respondents (see page 21).

🔍 Different Question Types and Responses

Measuring “how much”

Want to know how much respondents spend their time, money, or energy on something? Use a 5- or 7-point scale with words when respondents might not be able to easily recall precise numbers, and you don't need exact numbers in your analysis.

Example (verbal scale)

About how much of your food budget do you spend on ice cream?

- All of my food budget
- Most of my food budget
- About half of my food budget
- Some of my food budget
- None of my food budget

However, if it's possible for respondents to accurately answer precisely and that detail is important to your survey goal (e.g. you want to present exact numbers), use numeric intervals. Here's what we mean:

Example (numeric intervals)

About how much of your food budget do you spend on ice cream?

- 0-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-60%
- 61-80%
- 81-100%


👉 **Pro Tip:** If you want to present aggregated results as an average, consider having respondents enter an exact number, or percentage, not verbal or numeric scales.

Words or numbers?
It depends on the data
you need.


Different Question Types and Responses

Watch your ranges

It's important that you don't include overlapping ranges in your answer choices. For example, take a look at the questions below. When you do provide respondents with ranges, give them between 5-7 options, with 7 being the maximum number of different choices most people can keep in their heads at one time. Also, try to make your ranges roughly the same size.

-  **Avoid:** In a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching TV?
- 1 hour or less
 - 1-2 hours
 - 2-5 hours
 - 5-10 hours

If someone spends 2 hours watching TV, should they choose the second or third answer category? Should 5 hours be category three or four? Make questions easier to answer by making sure every possible answer is accounted for. Offer a “more than” option at the top of the range, for example. Also, try to keep all answers in the same scale (e.g. hours, dollars, kilometers).

-  **Use:** In a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching TV?
- Fewer than 2 hours
 - 2-4 hours
 - 5-7 hours
 - 8-10 hours
 - More than 10 hours

Make sure your ranges don't overlap—and give respondents between 5 to 7 answer choice options.

🔍 Different Question Types and Responses

Consider every option

When you're asking a question that has many different possible responses—for example, "Which cable service provider do you use?"—you may not be able to account for everybody's answers. Don't force your respondents to choose an option that's not a good fit. Include an "Other (please specify)" option.

- 🚫 **Avoid:** In the past 30 days, which website have you used most to watch TV shows?
- Netflix
 - Amazon Prime
 - Hulu Plus

- ✅ **Use** In the past 30 days, which website have you used most to watch TV shows?
- Netflix
 - Amazon Prime
 - Hulu Plus
 - Other (please specify)

✅ **Pro Tip:** We advise against using a "none of the above," "don't know," or "not applicable" option because that may encourage respondents to use the option to skip answers. Instead, you can get good data and save them time by using [skip logic](#) when someone answers a question in a way that makes other questions irrelevant.

Don't force your respondents to choose an answer that's not a good fit. Give them an "Other" option.

Flow and Best Practices

“Satisficers” is one of the particularly troublesome terms in survey science: these are people who rush through surveys, finding “good enough” answers that may not have been their real choice if they’d considered the options more carefully. When you’re smart about survey format and question flow, you can minimize this behavior, and collect more reliable data. How?

Require answers to all questions

When creating online surveys, require all questions to be answered so you avoid missing key data when respondents might skip a question by mistake or click the “next page” button too early.

Randomize answer choices when possible or relevant

Respondents disproportionately choose the first or last answers from a list of options because those are the easiest ones to spot. With the exception of questions based on a scale or range, randomizing the order of answer choices is a smart way to reduce order bias.

Use a natural question flow

Engage your respondents by giving them easier (and not overly sensitive) questions in the beginning. Keep related questions together, and make sure that the first questions in your survey are directly related to your survey’s topic. For example, don’t start by asking them how much money they make, and don’t start a survey about TV-viewing habits with a question about their political party affiliation. Ask unrelated questions—or demographic questions—at the end of the survey, after a little rapport has been created.

Flow and Best Practices

The shorter, the better!

When it comes to questions and surveys, be succinct and don't ask unnecessary questions. Respondents spend more time thinking about their answers if the survey is shorter—and they're less likely to drop out. From the millions of surveys we've run, we see a direct correlation between the length of surveys and decreasing completion rates. However, there are times when your survey needs to be long—especially if you're trying to capture many dimensions of a workplace, school, etc.

Make sure the right people take your survey

We talk a lot about the importance of writing accessible surveys and provide tips about the best ways to get people to take them. But sometimes it's better if you limit who completes your survey. If you want to know how people like your ice cream shop, you definitely don't want people who haven't been there to take your survey. In that case, use a qualifying question and skip logic.

Example


Have you visited our ice cream store before, or not?

- Yes
- No

If the respondent chooses "no," they will skip over the survey and land on a page that thanks them for taking the survey or informs them that they are not eligible to take the survey.

Speaking of skip logic, you can customize your respondents' survey experience with skip logic so they'll only see questions that are relevant to them.

Using your ice cream shop survey, for example, you might first ask whether they have had one of your milkshakes before asking a series of questions about your milkshakes. Respondents who have been to your shop, but haven't had one of your milkshakes, could skip ahead, avoiding questions that don't apply to them, keeping them engaged—and giving you better data.

 **Pro Tip:** If you're having trouble finding the right people to take your survey, SurveyMonkey Audience can help! Tell us who you want to take your survey, and we'll find you the people you need. [Learn more](#)

Flow and Best Practices

Include titles if possible

If you think using survey and page titles will bias your respondents, hide them. But note that titles help organize the survey and give your respondents a sense of order.

Brand Equity Survey

Brand Associations

1. Rate the following sports apparel brands along the dimensions provided. (Select all that apply.)

| | Value | Quality | Design | Comfort | Performance | Popularity |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Nike | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New Balance | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Adidas | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Brooks | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Under Armour | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mizuno | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Asics | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Puma | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Speedo | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Use page breaks (and mile markers) sparingly

We recommend that you don't use progress bars because they can be distracting. Similarly, telling respondents that they're "halfway there!" may cause them to rush through the second half of a survey. Don't let them focus on the time—keep them focused on answering the questions.

Limit matrix/grid questions

Take a look at this survey question. It's a Matrix of Choices question type with multiple answers allowed per row.

Where did your eyes go first? Were they bouncing around the grid? That's a lot of questions to take in all at once! Now imagine doing this on a smartphone where you'd have to scroll around to see all the options. When considering a matrix question, try to limit the number of both rows and answer options to be mindful of how respondents interact with the information to form a judgment. In many cases, it will actually be better to ask questions one at a time, limiting respondent frustration and encouraging careful consideration of each of their answers.

Index of Terms and Resources

Here's a list of the terms and concepts we covered in this guide. Click a term or phrase to learn more about it!

Getting Started

[Setting a goal for your survey](#)

[Jumpstart survey design](#)

(9-part video tutorial covering survey goal, question list, multiple choice questions, and more)

Question Writing Dos and Don'ts

[Anonymous surveys](#)

[Biased questions](#)

[Clear, unbiased questions](#)

[Double-barreled questions](#)

[Keep it personal](#)

[Question Bank](#)

[Time frame](#)

[Tips for effective and relevant questions](#)

(leading, loaded, jargon, etc.)

Different Question Types and Responses

["Don't know" answer choice](#)

["Not applicable" answer choice](#)

[Ranges](#)

[Unipolar vs. bipolar questions \(rating scales\)](#)

[Words vs. numbers](#)

[Yes/no questions](#)

Flow and Best Practices

[Design](#)

(length, page breaks, colors, logos, titles, and more)

[Disqualify a respondent](#)

[Matrix/grids](#)

[Question order](#)

[Randomization](#)

[Require responses](#)

[Satisficing](#)

[Skip logic](#)

[Survey length](#)

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