



# SurveyLegend's guide to Writing online survey questions like an expert

Writing effective survey questions guarantees reliable and accurate survey data.  
Read, enjoy and share this eGuide on writing perfect survey questions.

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# Introduction

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## Who needs online surveys?

When you are making decisions just for yourself, deciding is normally very easy. But as soon as other people come into the picture, and you have to decide for others, their needs, preferences, limitations, and expectations immediately effect the way you make decisions.

This is when you could really use a survey. Surveys help everyone to make wiser decisions. It doesn't matter what the question is, how big or how small, or if it has an impact on a personal or public level... In any case, an informed decision is better than a blind one.

**Online surveys** are amazing, because you can use them for practically anything. When you are planning an event with friends, or when you want to ask your clients about your brand or products. Even if you want to conduct customer satisfaction research, a survey will help you know how others think. Therefore, your decisions will be solid and more bulletproof.

## Who needs this guide?

Anyone who is going to make a professional survey with the world's best online survey tool - SurveyLegend - need the world's best guide for writing professional survey questions as well. We believe that sharing our expertise with you will ensure that you get reliable data; and accordingly make the world's best decisions.

However, if you want to become more expert in making online surveys, and apply advanced practices to your surveys, we invite you to follow our [Blog](#) > [Knowledgebase](#), where we continuously post interesting tips and tricks for professional surveys.



# Getting started

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## Determine your primary questions

There are two major questions that you yourself need to answer first, before starting to write the questions for your survey.

Primary questions	Focus questions
What do I want to learn/know/understand?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do my clients/customers rate my shop/company overall?</li><li>• Which aspects/characteristics of my products/services do my clients find appealing?</li><li>• Which aspects/characteristics of my products/services can be improved?</li><li>• ...</li></ul>
Who is my target group/population/respondent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do my returning clients, first-time clients, or one-time clients give the same answers to my questions?</li><li>• What are the differences in their responses?</li></ul>

These questions are just here to inspire you. They are too general, so don't ask them directly in your survey. However, having these general questions in mind will help you make customized questions for any survey topic.

## Create survey topic and subtopics

Now you should narrow your focus and extract a topic from your questions. After that, you can easily divide your topic into subtopics.

Focus questions	Topic	Subtopics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Overall rating of my shop/company</li></ul>	Overall rating	Customer satisfaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Aspects/characteristics clients like most?</li><li>Aspects/characteristics to improve</li></ul>	Characteristics Aspects Highlights	Service Quality Location Interior design Interface design Price Availability Accessibility Responsiveness Etc... <i>(based on the nature of your business)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Difference between responses based on various client groups.</li></ul>	Customer demographics	Returning customers First-time customers One-time customers Referred by other customers

After determining subtopics, it will be easier for you to write many survey questions. Just keep in mind that the questions which you create now may not always be the absolute best ones. You may need to modify them, or choose to ask some of them, based on your research preferences. However, they will be of great help to you in organizing, and making up your mind about what you need to ask.

Questions below are some examples of what can be asked:

Subtopics	Customized questions
Customer satisfaction	How satisfied are you with our company/shop in general?
Service	Overall, how do you rate our product/service?
Quality	Please rate our performance on providing quality parts and service.
Price	How important is price to you when choosing this type of product/ service?
Returning customers	How likely are you to recommend our company/shop to your friends?
First-time customers	How likely are you to visit us again?



# Dos and Don'ts

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## Rethink how to address your target participants

When you have decided what to ask, it's time to determine how to ask it. Your survey participants might belong to different demographic groups. Your target group might be specified in regards to age, level of education, profession, etc... Therefore you have to use a language that is clear and understandable for your audience.

In other words, you should speak their language. You should consider what they already know, and use terminology that is understandable to them. Always try to write your questions in a way that is coherent and easy to grasp.

## Be clear and concise

In a way, it doesn't really matter who is going to participate in your survey. You have to be clear with what you ask and avoid long and complicated questions anyway. Use words with clear meanings. If you have to use any less familiar expressions, jargon, terms or acronyms, make sure you provide descriptions for them.

If your participant has to read a question two times to understand it, this means you have already lost them. A good exercise is to practice writing questions that you could see yourself asking friends or colleagues.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	What was the state of your room when you arrived at our hotel in terms of cleanliness and tidiness?
<b>✓ Do</b>	How clean was your room when you arrived?

<b>X Don't</b>	Do you use any medicines several times per week or per month?
<b>✓ Do</b>	Do you regularly use medicines?

## Be humble

Sometimes people are frightened to respond to surveys. If respondents feel they are not qualified or good enough to answer a question, or if they feel sharing their true opinions might sound stupid to the creator of the survey, they just might leave your survey.

If you really want participants to share their true opinions with you without feeling intimidated, due to their level of knowledge, beliefs, or profession, then you have to make them feel comfortable by using the right tone in your survey questions.

So, when you ask questions, use phrases such as “do you think ...”, “do you feel ...”, “according to you ...” or “in your opinion”. In this way, respondents to your survey will not think they are participating in a quiz, and they will not fear their answers will be seen as right or wrong.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Which types of services should our company offer, to be considered a good company?
<b>✓ Do</b>	In your opinion, which types of services should our company offer, to be considered a good company?

<b>X Don't</b>	Is there any problem with the choice of colors in our product?
<b>✓ Do</b>	Do you feel there is any problem with the choice of colors in our product?

### Tip:

Some questions might be sensitive, and therefore participants might become defensive and hide their real opinions. To avoid such situations, you can make them feel that they are not alone, or they are not the only people who may have such opinions.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Do you think that the administration of your department needs to be changed?
<b>✓ Do</b>	Talking about reforms in the company, we have found out some of your colleagues think that the administration of your department needs a change. What about you? Do you share this opinion?



## Provide a timeframe

In many cases, the answer you are looking for is meaningful when put into a timeframe.

For example, you want to see whether or not your advertising campaigns have successfully reached local people in the past month. So, you make a survey and ask your participants: “Do you follow the local media?”

Well, this might be really hard for them to answer, or the answers might be very misleading for you. Maybe a respondent does usually follow the media, but for the past month they have been on a trip or for some reason could not follow the media, therefore missed your advertising campaign. So, if they answer “yes”, you might be upset with your campaign because you may think it has not reached them or has not been interesting enough.

So as you see, asking the right questions will be something like this:

“Have you followed the local media in the past month?”

More examples:

X Don't	Do you visit any health care professionals?
✓ Do	In the past year, have you visited any health care professionals?

X Don't	How much time do you spend watching TV?
✓ Do	In a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching TV?

In you do not have a clear or specific time period in mind, it can be a good idea to begin your questions with phrases or words such as “In general”, “Overall”, “Typically”, “Usually”. This make the participants answer based on their average behaviour or usual habits.

However, such questions are always harder to answer and it is more difficult for participants to evaluate something in vague timeframes.

If possible, you can place the timeframe in the beginning of your survey questions, to put more emphasis on it.

## Be unbiased, ask unbiased questions

Well, the whole point with doing a survey is getting the real opinions of your target group, not getting a result that you “like” or “prefer” to get. It’s all about being real and dealing with reality.

Survey experts count five common mistakes that might cause poor survey results.

### 1. Using leading questions

If you create biased questions in your survey, this can cause your audience to provide you with answers that might not be real. You should avoid leading them to an answer that you may prefer to hear.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Has our amazing new product made your life easier?
<b>✓ Do</b>	How do you feel about our new product?

### 2. Asking questions with loaded language

You usually have some personal opinions or preconceptions about the subject for which you have created the survey. But beware of allowing your own ideas to leak into your survey questions. Such mistakes can influence the participants and their responses.

When you ask questions with loaded language, you are putting emotions or connotations into the questions, that may effect participants as well.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	In the past week, how much time did you waste checking your Facebook?
<b>✓ Do</b>	In the past week, how much time did you spend checking your Facebook?

### 3. Asking double-barreled questions

Ask about one thing at a time. Try to make a distinct question for each subject that you need information about. Avoid asking questions that contains more than one subject. For example:

“Do you play computer games and watch TV a lot in your free time.”

How would the participant answer if they only watch TV and don't play any games, or vice versa? What is the answer to this question really? Yes? No? Kind of?

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Do you exercise a lot and eat healthy food?
<b>✓ Do</b>	- In the past two months, how much time was spent on exercise? - In the past two months, about how many days did you eat healthy food?

#### 4. Asking unbalanced questions

Give readers a possibility to express their opinions more freely, by putting opposing answers into the questions. In this way, the questions will have more balance.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Do you like mathematics?
<b>✓ Do</b>	- Do you like mathematics or not? - Do you like mathematics, or do you not like mathematics?

An unbalanced question is one that has a question stem that does not provide the reader with all reasonably plausible sides of an issue.

The problem of balance in a survey question also can apply to the response alternatives that are presented to respondents.

Unbalanced questions generally are closed-ended questions, but it is possible to use open-ended questions in which the question stem is unbalanced.

However, an unbalanced question may not always lead to biased data, but that is the concern in most instances.

#### 5. Asking overly broad questions

Avoid asking questions that expect respondents to write an article as an answer. For instance, if you ask a broad and very general question such as: "How do you feel about our product?" and then give them a comment box to fill in, what do you expect as an answer?

A product can be criticized or praised from many different angles. You should be much more specific and narrow down the topic; then write one question per topic.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	What do you think about our product?
<b>✓ Do</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Do you like the tactile quality of our product or not?</li><li>- Do you like the color that we use in our product or not?</li><li>- How easy is it to handle our product?</li><li>- Etc...</li></ul>

## Put your questions in the right order

When ordering your survey questions, you should try to put them in a logical order, and group questions for similar topics together. A good idea is to use *section breaks*, or *page breaks* (both available in SurveyLegend fields) between groups of questions, based on your surveying strategy. Also, it's better to put a brief overview of your survey structure in the beginning of your survey.

### **Put easy questions first**

If possible, easier questions should come earlier in the survey. This will create a pleasant start for your respondents, and it will be more likely that they continue answering your whole survey. It's always good to give this impression that the survey they are going to participate in is not that hard. In oral surveys, this also helps the interviewer build a good relationship and trust with the respondent.

### **Put difficult or sensitive questions last**

Conversely, put the more difficult questi



# Different types of questions and responses

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## Close-ended vs. open-ended questions

Sometimes you need answers that are easy to quantify. In such cases, you can easily go ahead and create a question with several predefined choices. Examples of questions with predefined answers that you can make with SurveyLegend are *single selection* or *multiple selection*. Results from such questions are really easy to illustrate, and very easy to understand.

Example:

Which one is your favorite mobile brand?

- Apple
- Samsung
- Sony
- Microsoft

When presenting the statistics for a question like the example above, you can easily illustrate that e.g. 70% of male participants liked brand X or Y. Such data is easier to use when making decisions, and easier to share.

However, pros recommend that in a multiple choice question, the choices should cover all possible answers. Sometimes, this will mean including an option for "Other," or "Don't know," or even "Don't wish to say" for sensitive questions.

Not only will this get you more accurate data, but it builds trust. If respondents feel you're trying to make them give you an answer they don't agree with, they may just skip the question, or stop answering questions altogether.

### Tip:

Some respondents can't or won't answer certain questions because they don't have the experience or aren't really sure how they want to respond. For these situations, you should offer an option for them to select "Does Not Apply" or "Don't Know." However, if you are sure that a respondent is absolutely able to answer the question, you don't need to offer an "out."

When you give the chance to participants to provide you with their own choices (which are not included in your predefined choices), you are making an open-ended question.

Example:

Which one is your favorite mobile brand?

- Apple
- Samsung
- Sony
- Microsoft
- Other [ *Give your own answer here...* ]

This gives participants some freedom to express and share more deliberate answers.

Example:

Which brand is your favorite mobile brand? (Please write your answer in the box below.)

**Tip:**

Although SurveyLegend offers open-ended questions, if you have the possibility, we recommend that you use closed-ended questions. We have great analytic tools and diagrams that can help you understand the data from closed-ended questions in an insightful way.

## Limit the respondents to single selection

Sometimes you need to give your respondents the flexibility to answer by making more than a single choice. Although SurveyLegend's *multiple selection* is a very useful survey field, it can be tricky to analyze the results you collect with it. If your participant chooses more than one of the answers, does that mean they are equally important?

Try to think whether you really need them to choose the answer that matters the most,, or just want to be nice and give them more choices and more flexibility?

It's not wrong to use *multiple selections*, but it's harder in most cases to evaluate the results.

## Make sure answers don't overlap

When using *single selection* questions, choices should be mutually exclusive and should not overlap. For example, if a question asks:

"Which kind of food is your favorite?", the answers shouldn't include both Indian food and vegetarian food, because there might be Indian foods which are vegetarian too. If someone's favorite food is one of those foods, which response is appropriate?

For scaled

## Unipolar vs. bipolar questions

Speaking of questions with scaled answers, how many choices/answers should you give the participants? Survey methodologists have come to the conclusion that:

**For unipo**



**Tip:**

SurveyLegend offers different customizable rating questions where you can choose smileies, stars, sliders, or thumbs. They work great in a digital survey!

## Use yes/no questions carefully

If you ask your survey participants: "Do you like to play computer games?" and give them only two choices of "Yes" and "No", what do you expect them to say? Sometimes they might have time and interest, and during some periods they might not have the time for it. Or they might like some specific sorts of computer games, but not all...

By limiting your respondents to only two choices, you ask them to see the subject as black and white. But if your aim is to analyze how people really think within the spectrum from black to white, then this is not a well thought-out question.

So, sometimes it's better to give them more choices.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Will you buy our product again?  <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
<b>✓ Do</b>	How likely are you to buy our product again?  <input type="radio"/> Extremely likely <input type="radio"/> Very likely <input type="radio"/> Moderately likely <input type="radio"/> Slightly likely <input type="radio"/> Not at all likely

**Tip:**

However, yes/no questions are very handy when measuring absolute facts. For example, the answer to "Do you own a cat today?" is either yes or no.

**Tip:**

SurveyLegend offers a visual type of survey field for yes/no or like/dislike or hot/not types of questions. Check it out by choosing Rating > Thumbs.

## Measuring quantities

When you want to measure how much your survey respondents spend time, money, or energy on something, you can use a scaled question with 5 to 7 choices. If you believe your respondents probably can't give you exact numbers, just use words like in the example below:

Example: Verbal scale

About how much of your food budget do you spend on eco-friendly products?

- All of it
- Most of it
- About half it
- Some of it
- None of it

However, if you think it is possible for them to answer with more exact numbers, and the numbers are important to you, go ahead and make some numeric intervals. It mostly depends on your data needs.

Example: Numeric intervals

About how much of your food budget do you spend on eco-friendly products?

- 00 ↔ 20 %
- 21 ↔ 40 %
- 41 ↔ 60 %
- 61 ↔ 80 %
- 81 ↔ 100 %

## Beware when making ranges

Remember not to make overlapping ranges. This makes people confused when they are trying to choose the right answer.

For example let's say you ask them: "About how long do you play games in a typical day?" and give them these choices: **A)** 1 hour or less, **B)** 1 to 2 hours, **C)** 2 to 3 hours, **D)** more than 3 hours. Which one should a person choose if he/she plays 2 hours per day? Choice B or C?

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	In a typical week, about how many days do you exercise outdoors? <input type="radio"/> 1 to 3 days <input type="radio"/> 3 to 4 days <input type="radio"/> 4 to 7 days
<b>✓ Do</b>	In a typical week, about how many days do you exercise outdoors? <input type="radio"/> never <input type="radio"/> 1 to 2 days <input type="radio"/> 3 to 4 days <input type="radio"/> 5 to 6 days <input type="radio"/> every day

Therefore, you should try to keep your ranges roughly equal in size and make sure they do not overlap one another.

## Include a way out

Let's say you ask a question about your respondents' favorite flavor of ice cream. You may include some flavors in the options that you provide, but will never be able to include all flavors. In such cases, it's better not to force the participants to choose only from your choices. Try to include an "Other" option.

You can even let them write down their own favorite flavors, with an open-ended question and collect the data for further analysis. There may be very interesting data in such responses.

Example:

<b>X Don't</b>	Which one is your favorite ice cream flavor? <input type="radio"/> Bacon ice cream <input type="radio"/> Garlic ice cream <input type="radio"/> Oyster ice cream <input type="radio"/> Hokey pokey ice cream <input type="radio"/> Salt and Straw ice cream
<b>✓ Do</b>	Which one is your favorite ice cream flavor? <input type="radio"/> Bacon ice cream <input type="radio"/> Garlic ice cream <input type="radio"/> Oyster ice cream <input type="radio"/> Hokey pokey ice cream <input type="radio"/> Salt and Straw ice cream <input type="radio"/> Other _____



# Flow and best practices

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Among survey participants, there are always some people called Satisficers . They quickly go through surveys and carelessly pick those choices that look good enough; which are not necessarily their real opinions. They might be tired, careless or less responsible, but you can control them or considerably minimize their behaviour when you create a smartly designed survey and apply best online survey practices.

## Require answers to all or critical survey questions

What makes online surveys amazing is actually having these smart possibilities. You can make any of your questions compulsory to answer; and demand respondents to choose an option or type an answer to be able to go on to the next page or to submit the survey. In this way, you can make sure that you will not miss any important data.

## Set input formats

It is possible to apply stricter requirements on some of those survey fields that users type their answers in. For example, you can choose to have characters, words, or numbers as your input format. By doing so, you will let SurveyLegend automatically verify the answers and if they are as you expect them to be, it will let the participants pass.

Read more about these great features [here](#).

## Set min and max input values

If you can predict approximate answers, or expect your participants' answers to be within a specific range, you can easily limit them to that range. SurveyLegend's input fields are smart and will not let them go past the question without providing the right answers.

Let's say you know that the participant's answer for one of your survey questions should be a number between 10 and 100. You can use a *number box* and limit the minimum acceptable value to 10 and the maximum acceptable value to 100.

You can use the same strategy with words or characters as well.

Read more about these great features [here](#).

## Randomize choices

When it is possible and relevant, you can randomize the order of choices or options. The reason is that some respondents tend to disappointingly choose the first or last choices from a list, because those are very easy to spot. This creates a problem known as “order bias”.

Although you cannot and should not randomize the order of scaled questions, randomizing the order of other choices is a good strategy for reducing order bias.

## Create a question flow that feels natural

Try to start your survey in a nice and welcoming way. Put easier questions first and group related questions together. You can use *section breaks* or *page breaks* to separate groups. Moreover, make sure to put those questions that determine your survey topic in the beginning of your survey.

Save your demographic questions, or less important ones for the end of the survey. In this way, you will not risk missing the most important data in case the respondent gets tired and leaves your online survey unfinished.

## Less is more

Don't make long questions and answers. Make them short and to the point. ALL online survey participants have a shortage of time and NOBODY wants to spend time reading long texts. So, give them more time to think about their true answers and opinions, by making concise questions. Also, as mentioned earlier, try not to ask for information that you don't really need to know.

And again, it all depends on you, your survey topic, and target group of participants. In some cases, the survey has to be long to cover many aspects of the topic. But if you get a chance to make the questions shorter, you are actually doing yourself a favor.

## Titles help, if you can include them

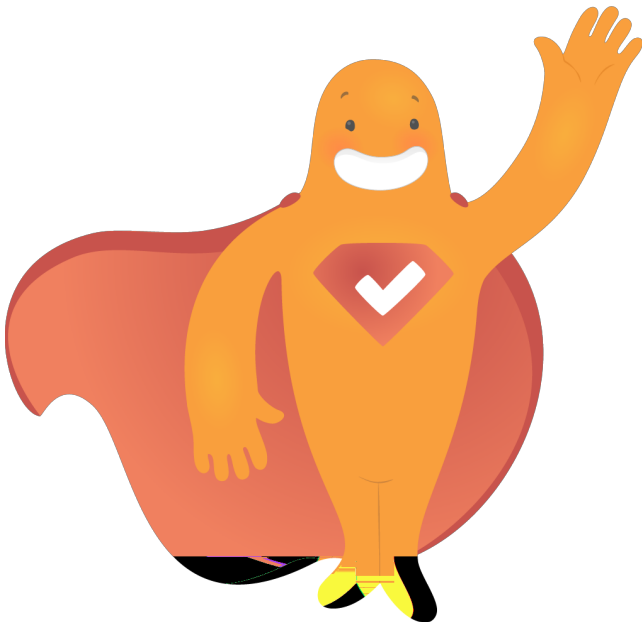
In most cases, putting a title on your survey pages will help the respondents to organize their minds and focus on the topic. But be careful not to include a title that has the power to create bias. Just like questions, titles can be loaded with words that evoke emotions. So, try to avoid such titles when you use *page breaks*, *section breaks*, or include a beautiful header using our *branding* field.





## More legendary stuff

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We hope you enjoyed this guide!

Wanna know more about the amazing SurveyLegend? Have a look at our [web site](#).

On our [blog](#), under the Knowledge base category, you can pick up more professional tips and tricks for online surveys.

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