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How to Create Unbiased Questions

This document will help you review common issues when creating Student Evaluation of Instruction questions. This information will help you evaluate your specific teaching in your own classes or disciplines with the use of more focused questions. To get the best results from students, best practices suggest that these questions should be unbiased and clear. It would even be helpful to ask a colleague for their opinion to check for clarity and a lack of bias. If you are unable to identify a colleague to assist, a member of the Student Evaluation Sub-Committee (SESC) will be willing to help. A biased survey often results in survey response bias because the questions asked and options provided are often ambiguous, vague or too complex to understand. In these situations, respondents provide a response that may not entirely reflect their true opinions. Other negative effects include a high rate of survey dropout, inaccurate data, and simply being a waste of time. So, what is an unbiased question? An unbiased question avoids leading words and is clear and specific. In both general polling and preference testing, it is important to keep these main ideas in mind as you design your survey:

1. What is a leading question?

A question that includes a positive or negative bias — words that consciously or unconsciously lead the respondents toward a certain kind of answer. For example, *How much did you enjoy the YouTube lecture videos?* (positive bias – implies that the viewer enjoyed it, and leads respondents to answer more favorably). Phrase your question objectively.

Bad example: Our amazing discussions have been beneficial for my understanding of course material.

Good example: Class discussions advance my understanding of course material.

2. Test only one thing at a time.

Do not use double-barreled questions. Also referred to as a compound question or double-direct question, a double barreled question is a question that addresses two or more mutually exclusive issues and requires only one answer. Compound questions in surveys usually occur when a survey attempts to clarify certain areas of a question by providing extra information or descriptions with synonyms. A double barreled or compound question is subject to multiple interpretations. The responses given to compound questions are not useful for analysis because, in many cases, these responses do not reveal the true point of view of

the respondent(s). When creating comparisons between two creative options, include only one test parameter per question, such as only asking about accessibility, difficulty, engagement, or utility.

Bad example: The instructional materials and classroom activities were useful for this course.

Good example: The instructional materials were useful for this course.

AND THEN also include: The classroom activities were useful for this course.

3. Simple is better.

You may need to **experiment with the level of specificity in your question**. Generally, the simplest form of the question will be the least biased. However, there are instances where you will need to direct the question a certain way rather than leave it open-ended. Just be sure to do it according to the two tips above.

Bad example: When discussing climate change in the beginning of the semester, and the class ran out of time but then started the next topic discussion the next class period, the instructor should have allowed more time to complete the discussion.

Good example: More time for class discussions would be helpful.

4. Don't be vague.

A vague question is a type of question that is broad, undefined, unclear and fails to focus on a specific subject area. If your survey contains vague questions, you will not be able to effectively process the data gathered at the end of the day. It is important for you to make use of phrases and terms that are precise in your survey questions. In addition, be sure to avoid the use of technical registers and complex words in your surveys that only a few persons can typically understand.

Bad example: I think students would recommend this homework platform.

Good example: I would recommend the homework platform used in this course.

5. Be positive.

A negative question is a type of question for which a "no" response indicates an affirmative answer and a "yes" response indicates a negative answer. It is best to avoid the use of negatives in your survey because negative questions are tricky and can easily put off respondents.

Bad example: I don't know about the course grading.

Good example: The course grading was understandable.

6. Do not make assumptions about your audience.

Ensure your questions are fact-based, not opinion-based. Sometimes questions include an opinion. For example, “Do you agree that students should be able to walk into class at anytime during lecture?” This assumes that students want to walk into class at anytime during lecture, which may or may not be true. But by including this assumption, you are leading more people to respond in agreement. Structure your questions around facts, not opinions. Make sure you’re not painting respondents into a corner so that they can only answer one way. In the first example, it would be better to ask, “Do you think students should be allowed into class at anytime during lecture?”

Bad example: My favorite assignment type is reflection journals.

Good example: What is your favorite assignment type? Or better yet... What assignment did you learn the most from?

7. Don’t get too personal.

It is better to avoid demographic questions on your survey to reduce or prevent the occurrence of high survey dropout rate or survey bias. If you are seeking demographic information please reach out to our Institutional Effectiveness office for support, i.e. Stacey Randall.

Bad example: I am a single mother.

Good example: None

8. Avoid fundamentally biased racist/sexist questions.

Questions like the bad examples below have been shown to be sexist and racist and these questions should be avoided. Instead, ask about specific issues/topics/assignments in the course to minimize this inherent bias.

Bad example: I would recommend this instructor?

Bad example: I enjoyed this course?

Bad example: I would take this class again?

Good example: The provided chapter worksheets were useful.

Good example: The self reflections reinforced my learning of the subjects.

Good example: The lab experiments advanced my understanding of the topics.

Good example: Group work in this course increased my communication skills.

9. Do take advantage of this opportunity.

With so many assignments, topics, and moving parts to your course, there are bound to be aspects of your course that you could seek feedback on. Take advantage of this opportunity to advance your instruction and your course. Students want to see you shine, let them help.

Other topics you may want to consider asking about are your textbook, skills built in your class, the utility of the assignments in your class, ranking between assignments (most useful, most effective), use of specific active learning pedagogies.

Good example: The textbook was useful.

Good example: The last unit on _____ was interesting.

Good example: The lab experiments were informative.

Good example: I enjoyed the group work.

10. Is this feedback relevant to improving my teaching?

Bonus #1: Although this bonus item doesn't deal with a survey being biased, it is best practice to only ask questions that you are going to use the feedback of to improve your teaching or the student experience in your course. Furthermore, ask yourself if this is the best method of obtaining this information. Would a survey of the course earlier in the semester be better (Faculty Development can help you set that up in Canvas or Google Forms), or is this something that the class could benefit from more if it were discussed face to face or via Zoom?

Bad example: I liked reading Huckleberry Finn.

Good example: Reading Huckleberry Finn increased by knowledge of course outcomes.

11. Am I covering all opinions?

Bonus #2: Designing good survey questions is not just about how the question is worded, but also about ensuring respondents are able to answer the questions as accurately as possible with the given responses available. You need to ensure the full range of potential responses is covered. This includes making sure that the "not applicable/other" and "please specify" (write in blank) options are provided as relevant. These options are important because they decrease the likelihood of students putting down a random answer when in fact they can't answer the question due to being sick that day or not engaged in the material.

Bad example: Our guest speaker on labor and delivery increased my motivation to succeed in this course.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Good example: Our guest speaker on environmental waste increased my motivation to take action against the causes of environmental waste.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Not applicable

Explain your response:

Please consult our Survey Question Bank for examples of unbiased and improvement focused questions you could include.

<Add link here.>

References

General clear questions:

<https://www.formpl.us/blog/biased-survey-question-example>

<https://www.pickfu.com/blog/write-unbiased-poll-questions/>

<https://www.questionpro.com/blog/course-evaluation-survey-examples/>

<https://www.questionpro.com/blog/class-survey-questions/>

<https://www.aacu.org/blog/student-evaluation-teaching-covid-19-considerations-validity-and-fairness>

Nonsexist/nonracist questions:

<https://cae.appstate.edu/inclusive-excellence/bias-course-evaluations>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225142764_Student_Ratings_of_a_Male_and_Female_Professors'_Lecture_on_Sex_Discrimination_in_the_Workforce

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225795905_Students'_stereotypes_of_professors_An_exploration_of_the_double_violations_of_ethnicity_and_gender