

7 Common Mistakes in Creating Questions

AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM



Mistake #1: Using complex language

The rule of thumb I learned while working on my Ph.D. is this: "norm" language for a third-grade reading level.

What does that mean?

Technically, it means that if the average third-grader was to answer your questions, they would understand all the words. But, what is the average third grader? Debatable. So, here's my rule of thumb:

Define your terms - or use simpler language - to make sure everyone is thinking about the question in the same way (and, in the way you intend). Don't leave room for guesswork or interpretation. Be very clear about what you want to know. I'd recommend reading each question aloud to see if it reads easily and also flag any tricky words.

With both of these small tweaks, the language is more accessible!



For example, let's say you want to ask some version of: What do you do when you experience a conflict with someone at work? I would rephrase this to: What do you do when you don't agree with someone at work?

Or, maybe you want to learn how much someone agrees with the following statement: "I think intelligence is fixed." I would rephrase this to: "I don't think you can change how smart you are."

Sometimes there's special vocabulary that you need to use. Assume people aren't familiar with it and provide examples.

Let's say you have a question that asks some version of: How often do you participate in "social causes?" I'd rephrase this to: How often do you participate in social causes, for example, issues like equal rights, poverty, the environment, voting, or health care?



Now, even if I'm unfamiliar with the term "social causes" I have some common examples that you see in the news or learn about at school to reference.

Mistake #2: Being too vague or general

Sometimes even simple words need some additional clarity. There are a lot of words that we're familiar with that people may not actually have shared definitions of.

Don't leave room for guesswork or misinterpretation - be very clear about what you want to know.

Let's look at an example: Were you satisfied with the service you received?

Well, what does it mean to be satisfied? Do you care if people had fun? Do you care if the service was useful?

Drill down to what you care about, and then ask that directly!

Personally, I care about whether or not what I provide is useful, so I ask some version of:

How useful was the [fill-in-the-blank] you received?



NOT AT ALL
USEFUL



A LITTLE
USEFUL



SOMEWHAT
USEFUL



VERY
USEFUL

Mistake #3: Not setting the stage.

Context matters! When asking a question, be sure to set the stage with the time frame and other important information you want the person to keep in mind when answering.

Answers may vary depending on what a person is considering when thinking through their response. Think about what you want to know. Don't assume I'll think about the context you want me to; provide me with the framing I need to answer the question accurately.

Spell it out - Do you want me to think about my experience in the past week, month, or year? Should I be thinking of how I am at work or how I am in my personal life?

Let's look at an example.

I introduce myself to new people.



Maybe I introduce myself to new people at work but not socially. That makes this question tricky! What is the context you want me to think of when I'm answering the question?

If you care about how I am socially, you might revise this to say:

At social events, I introduce myself to new people.



Now, right up front I know you want me thinking about what I am like at social events.

Mistake #4: Using double-barrelled questions

Stick to the 1 topic per question rule. If you read a question and you see the word "and," that is your sign that you are asking about 2 things, and there should be 2 separate questions.

Here's an example:

Let's say you want to ask if someone likes reading and writing.

You wouldn't want to ask:

How much do you like reading and writing?

NOT AT ALL A LITTLE SOMEWHAT A LOT

What if that person likes reading and not writing (or vice-versa)? How would they answer?

Would they say "a lot" because they really love reading or would they say "not at all" because they dislike writing? Maybe they would try to create an average of how much they like reading and writing and pick "somewhat."

That's WAY too complicated.

If you want to know how much someone likes reading AND writing - split it into two questions:

1. How much do you like reading?

NOT AT ALL A LITTLE SOMEWHAT A LOT

2. How much do you like writing?

NOT AT ALL A LITTLE SOMEWHAT A LOT

Mistake #5: Asking too many open-ended questions

I see open-ended questions a lot, especially on feedback forms. Open-ended questions are those that require a written or typed response.

There's a time and place for open-ended questions where people can freely write, but they can be more time-consuming & annoying for people to answer AND more difficult for you to analyze, especially once you have 20, 30, 50, 100+ people filling out your questionnaire - qualitative coding isn't for the faint of heart!

So what's the alternative? A closed-response or closed-ended question. Those are questions that are multiple-choice, "check all that apply," rank and sort - in other words, any question type that isn't answered with a text box.

"Closed-response" questions are quicker & easier for people to answer, and they give you shareable information - (think: XX% of people said YY%).

As you review your questions, ask yourself: Do I NEED a written response? Will I be able to analyze & use written responses? Could I more easily get this information by providing simple categories for someone to choose from?

Here's an example: Let's say you want to know the biggest challenge your clients (or prospective clients) face with their business. Here are two options for how you might ask this:

1. What is the biggest challenge you face with your business?

open-ended aka people write/type in their response)

2. What is the biggest challenge you face with your business?

- BALANCING MY WORK LIFE AND PERSONAL LIFE
- FINDING TIME TO CREATE CONTENT
- ATTRACTING MY IDEAL CLIENTS
- DECIDING HOW MUCH TO CHARGE FOR MY SERVICES
- OTHER, PLEASE SPECIFY: _____

closed-ended aka there are categories to choose from - of course, you want to tailor the list in #2 to YOUR specific business

If you are worried about missing a possible answer, you can always add an "Other, please specify" option!

If you go with option 2, you can quickly analyze the results and report out fun stats like 80% of people I work with say that "finding time to create content" is the biggest challenge they face with their business. If you go with option 1, you'll have to qualitatively code and interpret responses to draw a conclusion.

If you want more context, you can always add a follow-up question that says something like: Tell me more about why you selected the answer above.

Mistake #6: Not testing out your questions

Before you go live with your questions, ask someone to walk through and answer the questions with you. In research, we call this doing a "cognitive interview" or "cognitive lab."

I recommend doing a minimum of 1 but ideally at least 2-3 of these to benefit from different perspectives! Pick people who are most like the people who will be answering your questions - so, if your question is for teenagers, don't have an adult do the cognitive lab.

Here's how it works:

You ask someone to read through your questions and think aloud about how they'd respond. This allows you to flag any confusing wording or questions.

Key questions to ask during the cog lab are:

- 1. Was there anything confusing about the question?**
- 2. Did you understand the words used in the question, and do you think others would understand it?**
- 3. Did you have any trouble fitting your answer with the response options? If so, are there response options you'd prefer?**
- 4. Is there anything missing that we should have asked about? For example, when we ask about types of coursework available at your school, is there any activity in particular you think is important that we do not include?**

Mistake #7: Missing informed consent

Let's chat about ethics.

Did you know that when you do a research study, your plan and instruments are reviewed by a formal board to make sure that they do no harm to people? While it's not required when you are collecting information to improve your own products and services, I believe that anytime you collect information from people, you should provide them with key information so that they can make an informed decision about whether or not they want to share information with you.

To do this, you should be upfront about the purpose of the questions and how the information will be used. You want people to understand the importance of their feedback AND know what they're consenting to. You don't want to violate anyone's privacy or trust.

Here's what I recommend answering and sharing with people before asking them to answer your questions:

1. **Why are you asking people to answer these questions?**
2. **What types of things will you ask about in the questions?**
3. **How will the information from their answers be used?**
4. **Will answers be anonymous (you won't know they responded how they did) or confidential (you will know how they responded but you won't share it with anyone)?**



If you plan on pulling quotes from the information you collect for publicity, make sure you provide an opportunity for people to consent/opt-in to you using their words and/or name!

Recap

For each question you write, ask yourself these 7 questions:

- Did I keep it simple?**
- Am I being specific?**
- Did I provide enough context?**
- Am I asking about only 1 topic?**
- Should this question be close-ended?**
- Did I test this question out with at least one person?**
- Did I let people know why I am asking the question and how I will use the information?**



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ABOUT

Hi, I'm Kirsten (k uh r - s t i h n). I'm a researcher, creative, and entrepreneur — committed to challenging the status quo and working with you to make the world a better place. Think of me as someone to round out the justice league you're assembling to tackle society's greatest challenges.

Although I hold multiple degrees and have several letters after my name, I prefer to keep things very simple and practical, and I value intuition above all else.

If you are overwhelmed by research; frustrated that you're always having to fit your idea into someone else's box; or looking to feel recharged in your quest to change the world, I'm the expert for you.

I've worked with the Richard Bransons and Gates Foundations of the world as well as with grassroots organizations — people like you who are just getting started on their entrepreneurial journey.

What all of these changemakers have in common is this: deeply held values, commitment to learning and growth, and a vision for how to make the world a better place.