

But I don't understand what you're asking?
Evidence-based recommendations for writing good survey items

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When crafting a survey, one of the biggest challenges medical educators face is writing a set of clear, unambiguous items that respondents can understand and respond to accurately. Writing good items is both an art and a science. Nevertheless, there are many evidence-based recommendations that can be used to guide the item-writing process.¹ Below are recommendations that address five commonly asked questions about how to write good survey items.

Table 1. Evidence-based best practices for writing survey items.

Frequently asked question	Best practice	Rationale
1. Should I write my survey items in the form of a question or a statement?	Where possible, write survey items in the form of a question rather than a statement. ¹⁻³	Questions are more conversational and respondents are more practiced at answering questions as opposed to rating a set of statements.
2. What type of response options should I use, agreement response options or some other type?	Avoid agreement response options. Instead, use construct-specific response options where possible. ¹⁻³	Agreement response options do not emphasize the construct being assessed and may encourage respondents to acquiesce; that is, to agree with the item, regardless of its content.
3. How many response options should I use?	Use at least 5 response options and no more than 9. ^{2,3}	Using too few response options tends to reduce the reliability of a set of survey items. Providing too many response options will not be meaningful to most respondents. Also, using too many response options can give the false impression of high precision yet is unlikely to improve reliability.
4. Should I use an odd or an even number of response options?	Use an odd number of response options if your construct has a conceptual midpoint. ³	Although there is no definitive answer to the question of whether to use an odd or an even number of response options, in many cases, having a midpoint can encourage accuracy. This is particularly true if your construct has a conceptual midpoint (e.g., a "neutral" point) which many constructs do.
5. How should I label my response options: with numbers, verbal labels, or both?	Label all points along your response scale (not just the end points) using construct-specific verbal labels. ^{2,3}	Because of the additional information respondents must process, providing both numbers and verbal labels may increase cognitive effort and can extend response time.

Table adapted from Magee et al. (in press).⁴

References

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