

Behavioral Sciences
Research Methods



SURVEYS ARE IMPORTANT TOOLS in the evaluation process. A well-crafted survey asks questions in a variety of ways. There are two basic types of survey questions from which to choose: open-ended and closed-ended. In addition, within the closed-ended type there are five core styles of questions that may be asked.

Open-ended vs. Closed-ended Questions

Open-ended questions are questions to which there is not one definite answer. Open-ended questions may be a good way to break the ice with a survey, giving respondents an opportunity to answer in their own words. Example: "Are there any other comments about the course you would like to add?" The responses to open-ended questions can be very useful, often yielding quotable material ([Fink, 1995](#)). The drawback to open-ended questions is that the responses are more difficult to catalogue and interpret ([Fink, 1995](#)).

Closed-ended questions have a finite set of answers from which the respondent chooses. One of the choices may be "Other." It is a good idea to allow respondents to write in an optional response if they choose "Other." The benefit of closed-ended questions is that they are easy to standardize, and data gathered from closed-ended questions lend themselves to statistical analysis ([Fink, 1995](#)). The down side to closed-ended questions is that they are more difficult to write than open-ended questions. This is because the evaluator must design choices to include all the possible answers a respondent could give for each question.

Click either the "closed-ended" or the "open-ended" button to see what happens when an interviewer asks each type of question.

The Five Styles of Closed-ended Questions

There are five basic types of closed-ended questions to choose from. Each one is briefly explained below, with examples provided:

Likert-scale: When you want to know respondents' feelings or attitudes about something, consider asking a Likert-scale question. The respondents must indicate how closely their feelings match the question or statement on a rating scale. The number at one end of the scale represents least agreement, or "Strongly Disagree," and the number at the other end of the scale represents most agreement, or "Strongly Agree." If the scale includes other words at either end to further clarify the meaning of the numbers, it is known as a Likert-style question. Example:

How important do you think standardized test scores are to a fifth-grader's education (circle one number):

Not important	very				Extremely important
1	2	3	4	5	

Multiple-choice: When you want respondents to pick the best answer or answers from among all the possible options, consider writing a multiple-choice question. Multiple-choice questions are easy to lay out on a written survey. Include specific directions about how many answers to select directly after the question. Example:

Why don't you use the school's cafeteria services? (circle one):

- a. It's too expensive.
- b. Serving times conflict with my class schedule.
- c. The location is inconvenient.
- d. The food quality is poor.
- e. Other (please explain): _____

Ordinal: When you need all possible answers to be rank ordered, ask an ordinal question. Example:

Please write a number between 1 and 5 next to each item below. Put a 1 next to the item that is MOST important to you in selecting an on-line university course. Put a 5 next to the item that is LEAST important. Please use each number only ONCE.

- ___ a. Availability of instructor for assistance.
- ___ b. Tuition cost for the course.
- ___ c. Ability to work in groups with other students.
- ___ d. Quality and quantity of instructor feedback.
- ___ e. Number of students enrolled.

Categorical: When the possible answers for a question are categories, and each respondent must "belong" in exactly one of them, ask a categorical question. An example is in the diagram at left.

Numerical: When the answer must be a real number, ask a numerical question. Example: How old were you on your last birthday?

How Do I Know Which Type to Use?

Type of question...	Best Used for...
<i>Open-ended</i>	Breaking the ice in an interview; when respondents' own words are important; when the surveyor doesn't know all the possible answers.
<i>Closed-ended</i>	Collecting rank ordered data; when all response choices are known; when quantitative statistical results are desired.
<i>Likert-scale</i>	To assess a person's feelings about something.
<i>Multiple-choice</i>	When there are a finite number of options (remember to instruct respondents as to the number of answers to select).
<i>Ordinal</i>	To rate things in relation to other things.
<i>Categorical</i>	When the answers are categories and each respondent must fall into exactly one of them.
<i>Numerical</i>	For real numbers, like age, number of months, etc.