Guidelines for Survey Design
The questions and instructions you write on your survey are very important for the validity and interpretation of your results. Follow these guidelines (and work with your expert research and/or measurement partner) to ensure you are creating surveys that are accurate tools.

1. Use unambiguous phrasing.
Questions should be written clearly and be understood by respondents. What is clear to the creator is not always clear to others!

Examples:

Ambiguous: Doctors sometimes refuse to treat patients with HIV because they are impure.

Clear: Doctors sometimes refuse to treat patients with HIV because the doctors believe HIV patients are impure.

2. Avoid lengthy questions.
As a general rule, keep questions as short as possible; longer questions increase complexity and diminish clarity. However, it’s not a good idea to sacrifice meaning in the interest of brevity.

Example:

Too long: How much do you agree or disagree: I have friends who decided that they no longer wanted to be my friend after I told them I have HIV.

Better: How much do you agree or disagree: I have lost friends by telling them that I have HIV.

3. Avoid “Double Barrel” questions.
It’s a common mistake to write a question that conveys two or more ideas in such a way that an answer might refer to either or both ideas.

Example:

Double Barrel: What do your friends think of eating healthy and exercising?

Better: What do your friends think about exercising? [and then asking a separate question about eating healthy if this is important]
4. **Consider the audience’s reading level.**

Reading level of the questions should correspond to the reading level of the audience. In general, aiming for a reading level between fifth and seventh grade is probably an appropriate target for the general population. To assess reading level, see this resource on the "Fry Readability Formula.”

![Fry Graph for estimating Reading Ages (grade level)](image)

5. **Avoid double negatives.**

Statements containing two negative elements are confusing for participants.

*Example:*

**Double Negative:** Agree or disagree: The last health worker I saw was not unhelpful.

**Better:** Agree or disagree: The last health worker I saw was somewhat helpful.
6. Avoid leading questions.
Some questions set expectations, and can sway responses. Strive for neutrally phrased questions.

Example:

Leading question: Do you approve of invasive health worker home visits?
Better: Do you approve of health worker visits to people’s homes?

7. Ensure multiple-choice options are not duplicative.
Response categories should not overlap with one another.

Example:

Duplicate:

What is your total annual pretax income?
a. Less than $10,000
b. $10,000 - $30,000
c. $30,000 - $49,999
d. $50,000 - $70,000
e. More than $70,000

Better: Because someone who makes $30,000 could answer either “b” or “c,” the range of option “b” should be changed to “$10,000-$29,999.”

8. Ensure multiple-choice options are not exclusive.
Response categories should provide all possible options that could comprise a response list.

Example:

Exclusive:

What is your total monthly household income?
a. Less than KES 10,000
b. KES 10,001 - 30,000
c. KES 30,001 - 70,000

Better: Because someone who makes more than KES 70,000 can not answer the question, an additional option for this category should be added.

An additional example are True/False questions. If the person does not know the answer, it is difficult to respond either “True” or “False;” consider adding an “I don’t know” option.

When responses represent two opposite ends of a continuum, make sure both sides are “balanced;” there should not be more positive answers than negative answers, or vice versa. In general, scales should either have 3, 4 or 5 response options (more than 5 can be challenging to select an appropriate response).

Example:

**Unbalanced:**

*Combating drug abuse should be a top national priority.*

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Mildly agree
- d. Neither agree or disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

**Better:** Note that there are three “agree” options, one “neutral” option, and one “disagree” option. Option “c” should be removed, and replaced with “moderately disagree” option.

10. Test your survey!

These guidelines are just a list of a few confusing elements that commonly appear in surveys. Be sure to test a draft of your survey to make sure a representative reader can provide accurate responses.