Top 10 Survey Design Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

1. **Double-barreled question**
   Unclear
   "How helpful were the video and the skit activity in helping you to identify warning signs of emotional abuse?"

   Better
   "How helpful was the video in helping you to identify warning signs of emotional abuse?"
   "How helpful was the skit activity in helping you to identify warning signs of emotional abuse?"

2. **Double negative**
   Unclear
   Anger is never uncontrollable. (agree/disagree)

   Better
   Sometimes it is impossible for a person to control their anger. (agree/disagree)
   Or
   Individuals are responsible for controlling their own anger. (agree/disagree)

3. **Too few response options (low variation) or no response options (unnecessarily open-ended)**
   Limited response options
   I think there should be more opportunities for teens to learn about healthy relationships. ❐Yes   ❐No

   Better
   How important do you think it is to provide more opportunities for teens to learn about healthy relationships?
   ❐Very important   ❐Somewhat important   ❐Not very important   ❐Not at all important

   Unnecessarily open-ended
   What school do you currently attend? _____

   Better
   What school do you currently attend?
   ❐ Centerburg Middle School   ❐ Fredericktown Middle/Intermediate School
   ❐ Danville Middle School   ❐ Mount Vernon Middle School
   ❐ East Knox Middle School   ❐ Other: _____

4. **Response options not mutually exclusive: Words**
   Not mutually exclusive
   What kind of music do you like to listen to? (choose one)
   ❐Rap/hip-hop   ❐Country   ❐Alternative rock/Emo   Hard rock/metal
   ❐Classic rock   ❐R&B/soul   ❐Christian/Gospel   Other: _____

   Better (with "choose all")
   What kind of music do you like to listen to? (check all that apply)

   Better (with more specific wording)
   What kind of music do you listen to most often? (check one)

Or
What is your absolute, number-one favorite kind of music? (check one)

Tip: Adding "choose all that apply" will get around the problem of mutual exclusivity. But think carefully about how you will run the analysis and use the data before you do this. If a survey question is "choose all that apply," then each response option must be treated as its own "yes or no" variable (called "dichotomous"), such as "Classic Rock: Yes or No."

5. **Response options not mutually exclusive: Numbers (overlapping number categories)**

Overlapping categories
What was your annual household income in 2008?
❑ $0-$20,000
❑ $20,000-$40,000
❑ $40,000-$60,000
❑ $60,000 or more

Overlapping categories
How many TVs do you have in your house?
❑ 0-1 TVs
❑ 1-3 TVs
❑ 3 or more TVs

Better
What was your annual household income in 2008?
❑ $0-$20,000
❑ $21,000-$40,000
❑ $41,000-$60,000
❑ $61,000 or more
❑ Don't know

Better
How many TVs do you have in your house?
❑ None
❑ 1 TV
❑ 2-3 TVs
❑ 4 TVs

6. **Response options not exhaustive**

Not exhaustive
What is your race/ethnicity?
❑Black
❑White
❑Hispanic

Better
Which of the following best describes you? (choose all that apply)
❑ American Indian
❑ Asian
❑ Black or African American
❑ White or Caucasian
❑ Hispanic or Latino
❑ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
❑ Other: _____

Tip: Adding "other" to a list of responses will make it exhaustive. But think carefully ahead of time of all possible responses you can think of to list. If you have a large volume of surveys, it can be time-consuming to process all the open-ended "other specify" responses that respondents write in.

Not exhaustive
Are you currently pregnant? ❑Yes   ❑No

Better (with "not applicable" and "don't know" categories)
Are you currently pregnant? ❑Yes   ❑No   ❑Not sure   ❑Not applicable (male)

Tip: If it is possible that a question will not be applicable for many respondents, add a "not applicable" option. Add the "not sure" or "don't know" option for questions that may be difficult for some respondents to answer.

7. **Vague or confusing wording**
   Unclear
   Most people are raped by strangers. (disagree/agree)

   Better
   Most rapists are strangers to the victim. (disagree/agree)
   Or
   In most rape cases, the victim knew the perpetrator before the rape (disagree/agree)

8. **Confusing matrix format**
   Unlabeled matrix
   Rate these statements using the following scale: 5= Strongly Agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree.
   After participating in Re-Do Day, I am more…

Aware that my actions affect others.	5	4	3	2	1
Aware of the effects of teasing and bullying.	5	4	3	2	1
Supportive of others.	5	4	3	2	1

   Better
   Please rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

   After participating in Re-Do Day, I am more…

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Aware that my actions affect others.	5	4	3	2	1
Aware of the effects of teasing and bullying.	5	4	3	2	1
Supportive of others.	5	4	3	2	1

Tip: If you have 6 or more rows in a matrix, use shading or spacing to break them up and make it easier for the respondent to follow.

9. **Unclear where/how respondent should indicate response**

On how many days last week did you eat breakfast?

___ Every day ____ 5 or 6 days ____ 3 or 4 days _____ 1 or 2 days _____ None

On how many days last week did you eat breakfast?

❑Every day ❑5 or 6 days ❑3 or 4 days ❑1 or 2 days ❑None

10. **Too long!**
   - Pilot test it with participants to see how long it really is.
   - Review your SMART Objectives and delete any items that are not directly linked to your outcome or process objectives, or critical needs assessment or demographic information. Get rid of those "nice to know" items.
   - Use formatting to make the survey as easy as possible to fill out. Put questions with the same response options together in an easy-to-read matrix.
   - Reduce unnecessary "white space" and try to condense the survey to fit on fewer pages. (But be careful to keep font at 12-point or higher if any of your respondents are children (8-12), elderly, or have vision impairment.) A 2-column format may help to cut down on white space.
   - If you will have a large number of respondents, you could break the survey out into modules and only administer certain modules to certain groups.