

## Developing a Survey with Cover Letter

What is the answer to the great question of life, the universe and everything? The answer according to a popular novel is “42,” with the notation that “you’ve never actually known what the question is.” (Adams, 1981, p. 181). I mention this answer in regards to the first step that a researcher must take when developing a survey; the researcher must figure out ‘what the question is.’ Developing a survey is similar to developing a research design but on a smaller scale. Developing a survey is, for the purposes of this paper, concerned with the actual printed paper that a respondent marks up in answer to various smaller questions asked. Like the research design, the survey is developed to provide information, if not answers, to the larger question being researched.

After determining what the larger question is, the researcher must then figure out what types of information (smaller questions) will best answer the larger question and from whom these answers should be solicited (Passmore, Dobbie, Parchman, & Tysinger, 2002). The ‘whom’ is termed the population, that is then reduced to the sample that will then be the receivers of the survey. Types of smaller questions that can be used to gather information are placed into two groups: closed ended questions or open ended question. Close ended questions are harder to generate but easier to score whereas open ended questions are easier to generate but harder to score (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2006). Combinations of close and open ended questions (Fink, 2009) are used in completion or fill-in-the-blank questions, and scaled items and ranking items questions. Likert type question are only close ended based on a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale. Once the types of questions to be used are determined, then the researcher should meet with a focus group to develop terminology that will be used in the questions.

Basic guidelines to use when developing questions can be found in Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2006) and in Powell and Connaway (2004). They both recommend keeping questions short, simple and direct; insuring that the wording in the questions are in ‘layman’s terms’ to facilitate better understanding by all participants. Questions should be topically narrow enough to provide specific answers that will assist in answering the larger question. Leading or misleading questions should be avoided along with questions of a personal nature unless required as part of the necessary data. Answers to questions should be representative of all possible answers and questions asked should be familiar topics known to the respondents. Lastly it is recommended to keep the survey as short in length as possible so as not to infringe on the time of the respondents in any undue way (Ary, et al., 2006).

The arrangement of the questions on the page or the order in which they are presented can make a difference in how the survey is considered or marked by the respondents. Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2006) explain: to keep the survey from winding up in the trash, it is desirable to start off the survey with highly topical, close ended questions that draw the respondents’ interests and allow them to answer or mark the survey quickly. Remaining questions should be arranged based on shared content and then by type of question; type referring to close ended, open, ranking, etc. Questions should follow a logical order such as ‘watering a plant before it will grow;’ and general questions should precede specific or more narrowly scoped questions. Any personal questions that must be asked should be placed at the end of the survey (Passmore, et al., 2002).

The physical presentation of the survey also needs to be considered. Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2006) suggest that the questions be numbered consecutively and clearly distinguish the words of the question from the words of the answer choices. The text of the question should use sentence case, whereas the text for the answer choices should be in all uppercase. To assist in tabulation of survey results all

answer choices should be numbered. Answer arrangement and placement should remain the same throughout the survey with 'yes' answers listed before 'no' answers; switching to 'no' answers before 'yes' answers later on in the survey will confuse the respondent. Answers should follow a vertical placement under the question and should incorporate directions for continuing the survey if particular questions are not relevant to the respondent: 'if no, go to question 4.' Lastly, as recommended by Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2006), the survey should be printed at high quality standards.

At this stage, the survey is ready for field testing. Fielding testing is necessary to determine how effective the survey will be at gathering the information needed to answer the larger question. Field testing will show several things: if terminology used is appropriate, whether or not the survey was interesting enough for respondents to finish, any areas where questions are confusing, any items that are too personal, whether or not the directions are sufficient, how long it takes to complete the survey, and whether or not questions were interpreted in a similar manner by all respondents (Ary, et al., 2006).

The next step in survey development is to create a cover letter that will be used to introduce the survey to the respondents. The cover letter is the face of the research query and as such should answer and validate questions respondents may have about the legitimacy of the survey and their role in participating (Fink, 2009; Powell & Connaway, 2004; Ary, et al., 2006). Items that are necessary to the validity of the cover letter include the use of professional letter head from the sponsoring organization if there is one, a recent date, an explanation in regards to the purpose of the study and why the respondent should care, a request for the timely return of the survey, an explanation of the confidentiality measures of the survey, a promise to reveal the results of the research once they are determined, sincere appreciation for the participant's time, and a signature from the project director (Ary, et al., 2006).

Lastly, the survey with cover letter is mailed to the sample group and the research groups waits. To increase the number of surveys that are returned, Ary, et al., (2006) suggest using real stamps on the initial survey mailing and self addressed stamped envelopes for the return of the surveys. Further, the use of a monetary gift (\$1.00 US dollar) to encourage returns has been successful with other researchers by increasing the amount of surveys returned (Ary, et al., 2006). In addition to the monetary gift, follow up mailing are used after 10 days with follow ups at 3 weeks and 7 weeks (Fink, 2009; Ary, et al., 2006). Questions concerning the non-response rate of surveys may be answered by comparing the respondents to the actual population, the early respondents to the later respondents, and by interviewing a sample of non-respondents (Ary, et al., 2006).

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Fink, A. (2009). *How to conduct surveys: A step-by-step guide* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc.

Powell, R. and Connaway L. (2004). *Basic research methods for librarians* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

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