

# Common Survey Pitfalls

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If you are engaged in a project that uses a survey, it is important that you understand the rationale behind the types of questions being asked and the way the questions are organized. Here are some common pitfalls that good researchers try their best to avoid.

## 1. The order or type of questions produces unreliable answers

The type of question on a survey may produce unreliable data. Questions that ask people about private matters or force people to confront their own weaknesses may generate unreliable data. Sometimes, when these types of questions are being asked, wording choice can make a big difference. For example, a person may give different responses if they are asked,

“Do you ever lie?” vs. “Do you ever say things that are untrue?”

The order of questions may also produce certain responses.

For example, if a person is asked to list all the terrible things about her life and then answer the question, “are you happy?”, she is likely to say, no!

However, if the questions leading up to the last question invite respondents to reflect on the positive aspects of their lives, they may feel more inclined to say “yes!”.

Likewise, the order of *words* in a question can impact the answers. Consider this oft-cited example: a question was posed to a group of priests (as the story goes). The priests were asked “is it acceptable to smoke while you pray?”. The priests said no, it is not acceptable. Then, they were asked, “is it acceptable to pray while you smoke?” and the priests said, well yes, that is perfectly acceptable. Very interesting

## 2. Survey respondents are self-selecting

A self-selected survey is a survey that people volunteer to complete without being specifically or individually asked.

For example, imagine if a researcher was to create a web-based survey asking Canadians who the next Prime Minister should be: Jim Carrey, Ryan Reynolds, or Celine Dion. Fans of each of these people might step forward to vote for their favourite candidate.

If Jim Carrey’s name generated the most online votes, could a researcher reasonably conclude that he is the #1 choice of Canadians to lead the country? NO!

It would be incorrect to conclude from the example survey that “Canadians agree that Jim Carrey should be the next Prime Minister” because the sample who completed the survey is not representative of all Canadians – it is only representative of those that appreciate the peculiar antics of Jim Carrey.

Self-selection in a survey is not, in itself, problematic – *as long as the researcher makes it explicitly clear that the respondents self-selected*. The only responsible way to report the findings of that survey would be say that in a public, self-selecting survey listing Jim Carey, Ryan Reynolds, and Celine Dion, Jim Carey received the most votes.

Good researchers avoid drawing broad-based conclusions based on self-selected survey participation because self-selected participants often hold a biased view and may have non-representation motivations (in other words, a point to make about the topic at hand).

*Remember – good quantitative findings require representative samples.*

### **3. The wording in questions is limiting or unclear**

One common error in survey design – and this is particularly common in quantitative survey design – is related to the practice of unreasonably limiting respondents to set of choices.

For example, if a survey asked you, “what are your preferred methods of relaxing?” and asked you to select from the following list:

- Skiing
- Fishing
- Yoga
- Gourmet Cooking
- Golf
- Dog Walking

You might find yourself in the position where *no* answer choice represents your preferred method of relaxing. In these cases, respondents sometimes force an answer that is not actually representational, or skip the question altogether.

Unclear wording can also negatively impact survey responses. For example, if a pregnant woman is asked, “will this pregnancy have negative health impacts?” it may be unclear if the question refers to her health, the health of the fetus, or the health of any other children in her care, who are perhaps lacking for attention while mom snoozes on the couch.