Reconnections: Reconnections Consultancy & The Reconnections Project

Guide to Making a Successful Survey

This is a free guide created by [Reconnections](#) to help you create surveys that get the data you need.

Reconnections includes [Reconnections Consultancy](#) and [The Reconnections Project](#), both of which are run by Dr. Trent Grassian. Our mission is to foster unity and joint learning in an increasingly divided world. We do this by supporting those working for the public good to think critically about their work and the impact they are having. We create and disseminate free online tools (like this one!), resources, and blogs and do a range of freelance work, including evaluations, research, facilitation, and training.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Before designing your survey, review this guide and take the time to ask yourself the hard questions. You should refer back to the guide again when you are ready to start writing the survey and again once you have finished your initial draft. Make sure to double check that you haven't fallen into our ten common pitfalls (use the examples to help double check!) There's also a glossary at the end, if you come across any terms you aren't sure about.

Lastly, don't forget to get in touch to schedule a FREE, no-obligation [45-minute consultation](#) with [Dr. Trent Grassian](#) to get more support in your survey endeavours.

COMMON PITFALLS

1. Not being specific enough on what questions you want to answer.

2. Not asking the questions that will get you the data you actually need.

3. Not being clear on who your target population is.

4. Not thinking critically about what demographic data would (and wouldn't) be useful.

5. Using lots of open-ended questions *(a nightmare to analyse!)*

6. Asking the wrong questions or leaving out something crucial.

7. Sending out a survey without testing it first.

8. Not doing enough work to disseminate the survey to a diverse range of people.

9. Not incentivising people to participate.

10. Wanting to do far too much with one survey.

TRENT'S TOP TEN TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SURVEY

1. **Be as clear as you can on the question(s) you want to answer**: It is not enough to say that you want to understand the experiences of people experiencing homelessness, for instance. You need to **specify exactly what you want to know**: Is it about barriers to accessing temporary accommodation? Identifying what barriers are most common or having a deeper understanding

of a few barriers? Whether they have engaged with a certain type of service or experiences with those services? Be specific!

2. **Think about the data you need before designing the survey**: Once you have the questions you are answering in mind, write out exact phrases using pretend data to figure out how your questions need to be worded. There are infinite ways to ask even simple questions (e.g., What is your ethnicity?) and the way you word the question and frame the answers determines what you can report. **It is very easy to ask a question in a way that makes data unusable.**

3. **Specify the population you are studying as much as possible**: Who exactly do you want to take your survey? Is it *all* people who identify as LGBTQIA+? Does this include people who identify as cisgender but are questioning their sexuality? What about people who live in a different country from the one you're working in? People under 18? Again, **be specific!**

4. **Consider demographics**: This is important for two reasons. Firstly, when sending out the survey, **consider how you will share it and with whom**. As a general rule of thumb, you want your respondents to reflect your target population. That means that if 9% of asylum-seeking people in the UK are Afghans, you want your survey of asylum seekers to include about 9% Afghans. However, if you want to focus on specific groups, particularly if that group is a small proportion of the larger population you are targeting, you may want a disproportionately higher number of them to respond. E.g., if you want to survey people working in the charity sector, but want to make sure you hear from plenty of CEOs (a very small proportion of all charity staff), you will need to take extra steps to specifically target CEOs.

   Secondly, **consider the demographic questions you will ask.** Include some demographic questions – *What if your programme is having a bigger impact on a certain group? Or, your survey responses are overwhelmingly male? You need to know these things!*, but **you don't want to ask unnecessary questions**. Be succinct but targeted with your questions.

5. **Minimise open-ended questions**: While it is great to add qualitative data to add further depth to any quantitative findings, analysing open-ended questions takes exponentially longer. You should **only have a few open-ended questions** (at most) **that you are confident you need and already have an idea of how you will analyse them**.

6. **If possible, end your survey with "Is there anything else you'd like to add?" (or similar)**: I know I said minimise open-ended questions, but **you don't know what you don't know**, and trends that come up in this question can give you new and interesting insights. If there's space, it's a great question to include.

7. **Pilot your survey before sending it out**: Make sure you have at least 10 people try the survey before you distribute it (potentially more, depending on your target population's diversity). This should ideally be a diverse group of people from your target population. Otherwise, **you risk sending out questions that are misinterpreted**. This is also a chance to **check that your survey is getting you the right data**.

8. **Send at least 1-2 reminders**: People are busy, and people forget things. Ideally, **send reminders at different times on different days of the week**, to increase your chances of catching people at the 'right' time.

9. **Give an incentive**: There are a lot of surveys out there. A lot of videos to watch, blogs to read… Give people a reason to complete your survey. Research suggests that **the bigger the reward, the more responses you will get** (though this effect reduces as the prize continues to increase), so I usually suggest one big reward that a random participant will receive.

Those working for the public good need to **demonstrate that we value people's expertise and reward them accordingly**. While some surveys seek respondents in a professional capacity (meaning that they are already being paid for their time), other surveys target people with 'lived experience'. For the latter, we should ideally compensate all respondents.

10. **Be as succinct as possible**: If you only follow one of these tips, make it this one. A survey should never take more than 5-10 minutes (if you can help it). Ideally, the average person should take 5 minutes or less. I usually aim for between 2-4 minutes. **You will get far more responses the shorter your survey is**, and having **a high number of responses is one of the best ways to have impactful data that you can have a high level of confidence in**.

EXAMPLE 1: EXPERIMENTING WITH QUESTION WORDING TO GET THE RIGHT DATA

Let's say you want to know about people's experiences with fatigue. Here are a few examples and the data they give you. Consider how this applies to your survey and try out several different question styles, making sure you take note of what data you will (and won't!) get as a result.

Option 1: *I have enough energy for everyday life.* 5 answer choices, ranging from *Never to Always.*

⇒ You will be able to say things like "20% of people said they always have enough energy for everyday life" or "60% of people have enough energy for everyday life at least some of the time".

⇒ You won't be able to say things like "80% of people report experiencing fatigue" or "Most respondents had enough energy for everyday life at least 3 days a week".

Option 2: *I feel exhausted*. Scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *'Strongly disagree'* and 10 is *'Strongly agree'.*

⇒ You will be able to say things like "30% of people strongly agreed that they feel exhausted" or "The average response was 4".

⇒ You won't be able to say things like "50% of people experience fatigue most days" or "40% of people report struggling with fatigue".

Option 3: *I am bothered by fatigue.* 3 answers choices: *Yes, No, or Not sure.*

⇒ You will be able to say things like "60% of respondents stated that they are bothered by fatigue" or "Respondents were more likely to be bothered by fatigue than not to be".

⇒ You won't be able to say things like "40% of people are bothered by fatigue most of the time" or "Fatigue bothered most respondents on most days".

Option 4: *I experience fatigue.* 5 answers choices ranging from *None of the time to Always.*

⇒ You will be able to say things like "50% of respondents never experience fatigue" or "70% of respondents experience fatigue at least some of the time".

⇒ You won't be able to say things like "Most respondents experience fatigue at least three days a week" or "30% of respondents generally feel exhausted".

Option 5: *I don't have enough energy for everyday life.* 8 answer choices, ranging from *'An average of 0 days a week'* to *'An average of 7 days a week'.*

⇒ You will be able to say things like "20% of respondents had enough energy for everyday life 6 days a week" or "40% of respondents don't have enough energy for everyday life at least 5 days a week".

⇒ You won't be able to say things like "30% of respondents struggle with fatigue" or "Most respondents feel exhausted at least some of the time".

EXAMPLE 2: TESTING QUESTION WORDING TO AVOID MISINTERPRETATION

It is very easy to have a question misinterpreted, ruining your data. Worst of all, some people might interpret it one way and some another! Or, your answer choices might ruin your data by not having enough / the right options.

Let's say you want to survey people about their dietary habits. The five options below demonstrate just how difficult it can be to accurately track self-reported behaviour and how different wording can lead to completely different answers. This is a great example of where piloting is crucial in being able to check how accurate your data will be and how people will interpret the question.

Option 1: Ask about what they ate over the past 2 days.

- **Benefits**:
  - ⇒ Since this is the recent past, people are more likely to remember what they ate.
  - ⇒ The set time period means the data (should be) comparable between respondents, though…
- **Risks**:
  - ⇒ People may interpret the past 2 days differently, depending on the time of day they take the survey. This could lead to some people answering about shorter periods than others.
  - ⇒ Though recent, people may still not remember what they ate.
  - ⇒ People are likely to under-report things they may feel embarrassed / ashamed of eating and over-report things they think will make them seem like they are making good decisions.
  - ⇒ The day and time you send out the survey can impact what people say, as people are, for instance, more likely to eat less healthfully over the weekend.

Option 2: Ask about what they ate over the past 48 hours.

- **Benefits**:
  - ⇒ Clearly defined time period for comparison purposes.
  - ⇒ Since this is the recent past, people are more likely to remember what they ate.
- **Risks**:
  - ⇒ Though recent, people may still not remember what they ate.
  - ⇒ People are likely to under-report things they may feel embarrassed / ashamed of eating and over-report things they think will make them seem like they are making good decisions.
  - ⇒ When you send out the survey can impact what people say, as people are, for instance, more likely to eat meat with dinner than with breakfast.

Option 3: Ask about what they usually eat, such as: *In a typical week, how often would you eat…*

- **Benefits**:
  - ⇒ Looks at general eating habits, which could be more accurate than a random period of two (or more) days.
  - ⇒ Better at identifying irregular eating patterns (e.g., someone who eats fish once a week, but happened to eat it yesterday). Reduced risk of data being skewed by unusual eating habits.
- **Risks**:
  - ⇒ People are unlikely to be able to accurately state what they usually eat.
  - ⇒ People are likely to under-report things they may feel embarrassed / ashamed of eating and over-report things they think will make them seem like they are making good decisions.
  - ⇒ Larger burden on the participant, as these questions are more difficult than asking what they ate over a shorter period.

Option 4: Ask them to keep a food diary for, for example, a 7-day period from Monday to Sunday.

- **Benefits**:
  - ⇒ Most likely to be accurate in terms of what someone actually consumed during the time period assessed as they are (ideally) writing what they are eating as / just after eating it.
  - ⇒ Could cover a longer period, reducing the risk of data being skewed by unusual eating habits and potentially producing more accurate trends over time.
- **Risks**:
  - ⇒ Time periods should also be specified to avoid confusion / inaccuracies (e.g., if someone eats a snack at 1:00am on Monday, does that count?)
  - ⇒ Despite likelihood this is more accurate than options 1-3, people are still likely to misreport portion sizes if they aren't weighing everything they eat (including each ingredient). People will still be likely to under-report things they may feel embarrassed / ashamed of eating and over-report things they think will make them seem like they are making good decisions.
  - ⇒ The act of keeping a food diary is likely to impact what people eat, being more likely to make decisions that they believe the researcher(s) will view favourably.
  - ⇒ May miss eating habits that are very irregular (e.g., once a month).
  - ⇒ Larger burden on the participant than previous options.

Option 5: Ask them to buy all of their food for a set time period (e.g., one week) and then upload the receipt.

- **Benefits**:
  - ⇒ 100% accuracy in terms of what food someone has purchased and *plans* to consume.
  - ⇒ Able to conduct detailed analysis into nutritional content, serving sizes, etc.
- **Risks**:
  - ⇒ Instructions need to clearly state that individuals cannot eat anything outside of what was purchased and that they must consume all of the food (or report if they did not, if that's an option). Nonetheless…
  - ⇒ What is purchased may not accurately reflect what someone eats (e.g., if they eat out, if they don't eat everything they purchased, and/or if they consume something else at home).
  - ⇒ For multi-person households, this data will be even more difficult to accurately analyse.
  - ⇒ Depending on how this is done, it could place a large burden on the participant.

EXAMPLE 3: MAKING SURE YOU DON'T INVALIDATE YOUR DATA

It's very easy to make an error that invalidates your findings. It's important that you include enough potential answers to account for people's experiences, beliefs, identities, etc., and that you don't word things in a way that makes your data unusable.

Let's say you want to survey people about feelings of anxiety. You could ask a lot of different questions. Here are a few example questions to demonstrate common errors.

Example 1: *On average, how many days a week do you experience anxiety?* Answers ranging from *1 to 7*

- ⇒ **Potential Error:** Without the inclusion of 0, you reduce the data's accuracy. People who experience no anxiety, on average, will end up answering '1' or something else. *(This would not apply if this survey is only for people who experience anxiety at least 1 day a week on average).*

Example 2*: What impact did the 3-day online course have on your feelings of anxiety?* Answers ranging from *No Change* to *Significant Change*

⇒ **Potential Error:** If it is possible that people responding did not attend the online course, an option like 'Does not Apply' or 'N/A' needs to be included or people will give false answers.

Example 3*: Do you think Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a helpful approach to treating anxiety?* Answer choices of *Yes*, *Maybe*, or *No*

⇒ **Potential Error**: People may not be familiar with CBT. In this case, you should include an option like 'Don't Know' or 'Not Sure'.

⇒ **Potential Error**: This doesn't tell you if people think CBT could have a negative impact. It only tells if people think it is helpful or they don't think it's helpful, not if they think it is *un*helpful.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Close-ended questions: Questions that have a set of fixed responses, such as: numeric scales, yes/no questions, or asking about how often something occurs. These are used to produce quantitative data.

Lived experience: A type of expertise sought in a research population that is based on a person's experiences, decisions, and identities. This could include people who have experienced being an immigrant or people who identify as Black/Black British.

Open-ended questions: Questions that do not have pre-determined answers, where participants' answers have no constraints (other than possibly character/word length). These are generally used to produce qualitative data, though there are some ways they can be quantified.

Piloting: This should be the first stage after you've finished making your survey, where you send it out to people to test the feasibility of your methods. It's a way to test if the questions make sense and people will be able to answer them accurately. Ideally, this should include a diverse group of people reflecting the target population you are studying. After piloting, you have a chance to make final amendments to your survey. There are a lot of debates about whether pilot responses can be used in your final sample. If you do end up using pilot data, make sure that (a) your survey has not changed since the pilot; (b) there is no chance someone could answer the survey twice; and (c) that all pilot respondents fit in your target population.

Qualitative research: Research that aims to gain insights into groups, experiences, or opinions that cannot be objectively measured using mathematics. This includes questions like *"How?"* or *"Why?"* Qualitative data can include videos, focus groups, interviews, written answers, journal entries, art pieces, photographs, and more.

Quantitative research: Research that aims to gain precise measurements that can be used to demonstrate cause and effect. In theory, quantitative data should be objective (though there are a lot of questions and issues around how objective you can ever truly be in research). In a survey, this can be done using close-ended questions.

Sample: These are the people who actually completed your survey and you are including in your findings. Ideally, you want them to be diverse in similar ways to the target population, so that you can use your results to draw conclusions about the wider population you are interested in.

Target population: The wider group that you are trying to understand through your research. This could be, for instance, all women who have experienced domestic violence in the UK.