Survey Design Tips

Include an introductory page.
- Explain why you are conducting the survey, if that won’t affect your results.
  - If it will, be vague.
- Explain how long the survey will take to complete (e.g., “This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.”)
- Explain that your survey is confidential or anonymous, and explain what that means.
  - “This survey is anonymous; no personal information (e.g. name, birthdate) will be collected.”
- Include your institution and contact information. You may want to set up a separate study email to avoid getting spam.
- Have a way to assure that participants consented to the study.
  - “By checking this box, you agree…”
  - “By clicking NEXT and proceeding with the survey, you agree…”

Make sure that your survey “flows” well.
- Opening questions should be the easiest to answer.
- Make sure that your questions are relevant to what you said the survey was about.
- Keep your questions short and easy to read; avoid using jargon.
- Keep similar questions grouped together to avoid confusion.
- Include sensitive questions towards the end of the survey.
- Ask demographic questions (age, race, gender) at the end of the survey. This makes sure that these answers don’t influence the answers to other questions.

Make sure your rating scales make sense.
- Label all of your rating scale ticks.
- Use consistent scaling – if your first rating is negative for the first question, make the first rating negative all the time.
- In general, order your questions from negative to positive or from smallest/least frequent to largest/most frequent, left to right.
- Balance your rating scale – include equal numbers of negative and positive responses.
- Use words instead of numbers for rating scales that measure attitudes. You can (and will) always recode them into numbers later, but it’s less confusing for the participant.

Ask frequency questions using numbers, not words.
- E.g., don’t use a multiple choice or rating scale that asks “never”, “rarely”, etc. Ask them to enter or select numbers.
Construct categorical questions carefully.
- Use drop-down boxes to control people’s responses when there are a lot of possible responses (e.g. age).
- Only ask “other” if you really want to allow people to select “other” and are interested in categories you may have missed. To get a list of categories you may have missed, include a text box with “other”.
- Make sure that you don’t allow participants to choose more than one category unless you really want them to be able to.
  - And if you do, think really hard about this. Do you really want them to be able to select more than one?
  - If you want to compare people across groups, then you probably don’t.

Construct questions so that numerical responses are imported numerically.
- Use drop-down boxes or multiple-choice radio buttons instead of text entry boxes.
- If you use text entry, constrain the maximum length. E.g., if you’re asking age, constrain to two categories if you are using text entry boxes.

Construct questions carefully and clearly.
- Avoid double-barreled questions.
  - E.g., “How satisfied are you with the location and hours of the library?”
- Avoid leading questions
  - “Most people, after watching this video, say that it makes them feel happier. How happy do you feel right now?”
    - You’re influencing their answer with the first statement.
    - You’re assuming that they feel happy.
- Don’t use abbreviations, unless they are very widely known (e.g. HIV, AIDS).
  - E.g., “How do you feel about the ACA?”
  - Check to make sure that your abbreviation is really widely known before using it.
- Avoid framing questions in the negative.
  - “How frequently do you not attend class?”
- Avoid using double negatives
  - “Students should never not go to class.”
- Avoid using the passive voice.
  - “How unhappy were you made to feel by this video?”

Have someone who wasn’t involved in your survey design look at your survey.
- Reword the question if:
  - They have to ask you what a question means
  - They look confused while reading a certain question
  - They give an unexpected response to a question
- Remember that you won’t be sitting besides people as they take the survey, so it needs to be clear and unambiguous from the start!