

Constructing your survey

This document will help Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients construct a survey for youth after they prepare the survey items.

Assembling survey items

When you pull together the final version of the survey, the order of the items is important.

Start with easy questions

Most people who drop out of a survey drop out near the beginning, so the first questions should be easy to answer. The items you start with will vary based on your research questions and what you want to measure. They might be about school or the program youth are in.

Group similar items together

Grouping questions on the same topic helps respondents stay on track with the subject and recall information as accurately as possible. Section breaks or prompts can help cue a respondent that they need to shift their thinking to a new topic.

If there is a change in the question format, visual indicators can be helpful. Cues might include bolded or capitalized words or phrases (for example: **"Select all that apply"**).

Place demographic questions at the end

Respondents may find demographic questions to be personal. Leaving them until the end of the survey can keep them engaged and more likely to complete the critical items in the survey.

Tips for constructing

The way the survey is constructed will affect a youth's experience taking the survey and make them more or less likely to complete it.

Prompt respondents when changing topics

Surveys should let the respondent know when they are transitioning to a new topic. This can be especially important for sensitive topics.

Avoid unnecessary questions that increase the survey's length

Respondents can tire of answering longer surveys. This makes them more likely to skip questions, resulting in missing data. When planning for the length of the survey, consider the time allotted for survey administration, especially if it needs to fit within a class period.

Check for consistency

Surveys should be consistent in wording, response options, and recall periods. It is easier for respondents if scales are consistent throughout the survey. For example, if you use a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, try to use the same scale throughout the survey (with different items but similar response options). If change is necessary, it's important to say so explicitly in your instructions. For example, if switching recall periods, include an instruction such as "Now, we will ask you to think back over the last 30 days ...".

Consider the format of items on the web

Web surveys require thoughtful design. For instance, if a survey is taken on a cell phone, it can be difficult to see items that are designed to be seen larger, such as ones formatted in a grid. Ideally, respondents should see the full survey item without needing to scroll horizontally. It can also be a good idea to only show one question at a time.

Use skip logic

Programmed skip logic (or routing) enables respondents to avoid questions that don't apply to them. By using their earlier responses to let them skip irrelevant questions, skip logic can help respondents finish the survey faster.

Additional resources

Survey design. Online book from the University of Michigan.
<https://ccsg.isr.umich.edu/chapters/questionnaire-design/>

Collecting data virtually. A SRAENE presentation.
[https://sraene.com/sites/default/files/2021-03/Virtual Data Collection.pdf](https://sraene.com/sites/default/files/2021-03/Virtual%20Data%20Collection.pdf)

Collecting data virtually. A SRAENE tip sheet.
<https://sraene.com/sites/default/files/2023-04/SRAENE-VirtualSurvBestPractice.pdf>

Collecting data virtually. A SRAENE video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=iUhqT6XOqN4>

Web survey methodology. Online book.
<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/web-survey-methodology>

Achieving high response rates. A SRAENE tip sheet.
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/SRAENE_HighResponseRates.pdf