

How to...



Develop a questionnaire survey

Ask the right questions

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Further information about ethics and data security can be found on the 'Research in Schools' web pages (www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/research-in-schools/ethics-and-data-security.cfm).

Some important ethical considerations for undertaking questionnaire surveys within schools, are outlined below.

- Check whether your school has a research governance or ethics policy. If so, you must follow it.
- Ensure you get senior leader support for your questionnaire survey before commencing your research. This may mean that they want to review the questionnaire before administration.
- Ensure that questionnaire surveys are the most appropriate method for your research topic. For example, it may be more appropriate to ask about highly sensitive topics¹ through face-to-face interviewing rather than using a questionnaire survey.
- You must comply with legal frameworks, such as the Data Protection Act (1998) which states that all participants must be informed of the purpose of the research and what will be done with the data, e.g. how it will be stored, how it will be reported on and when it will be deleted.
- All potential participants must give consent to be involved in the research. This can be active (opt-in) or passive (opt-out) consent.

- All participants have the right to withdraw from the survey at *any time*, even where proxy consent has been given by a parent/carer, teacher or headteacher or where they start the survey but choose not to complete it.
- Have a plan for dealing with potential disclosures made during the survey. You will need to be familiar with your school's disclosure and child protection policies (including who the designated staff member is).
- Ensure you have a plan and the resource to collect, collate and store your survey data securely; you must store all data securely by password protecting electronic files or locking away paper-based data.

Questionnaire surveys do not usually ask for the name of the participant in order to make it anonymous. In general it is only advisable to ask for a participant to provide their name if you need to be able to track their responses later or match it to other data, but you need to be aware that this could affect how they fill in the questions. A participant might not answer in the same way as if they knew their responses would be anonymous. If you ask participants to give their name you need to explain to them why you are asking for their name and whether their answers will be anonymised before the data is analysed and reported.

Carrying out research within your own environment creates increased potential for participants to be identifiable, even if you do not ask for their names. Depending on how you analyse the data and split the data into sub-groups, you may end up with very few respondents in each group therefore increasing their chances of being identifiable. Ensure you consider these issues when designing your survey questionnaire.

¹ When exploring sensitive topics through a survey, or other methods, it is good practice to provide details of a suitable helpline website for further support (e.g. Childline).



It is not always necessary to provide a neutral option; in fact you may want to 'force' respondents to provide an answer one way or the other by omitting a neutral response option. This will depend on your question and whether respondents may get frustrated if there is not a response option that fits the answer they want to give (and therefore they may not complete the question or questionnaire at all).

It is also possible to include a 'not sure' or 'don't know' response option. It is best practice to only do this for factual questions (i.e. where the respondent genuinely does not know the answer to the question).

A series of single response questions

A series of single responses is a **list of questions each with one response**. These can be a list and/or a scale. For example:

How would you rate the quality of the school's: (please select one box on each row)

	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Not sure
Library	<input type="checkbox"/>					
IT suite	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Canteen	<input type="checkbox"/>					

How would you rate the quality of the school's library?

(Please select one)

- Very poor
- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Very good
- Not sure

These types of questions often allow you to collect more detailed data and are often used for collecting information on attitudes (i.e. opinions on a topic).





Components of a question

There are a number of components to a question. It can be useful to know the technical terms for the different elements. Figure 3 below outlines the different elements.

Figure 3 Components of a question

Which lesson do you enjoy the most?

(Please select one)

Maths

English

Science

PE

Other

Please specify _____

This is the 'stem'

This provides instructions to the respondent

These are the response options

Language

When developing questions, you need to ensure your intended respondents will be able to understand your questions. The types of questions you would ask for a Year 11 learner is very different from the way you would ask a question on the same topic for a Year 5 learner. You may also want to consider using images for response options for younger children, for example providing the option of a smiling face or a frowning face as well as, or instead of words. There are some key things to consider, as presented in figure 4 below.

Figure 4 Language considerations

- 1 Be clear and unambiguous.
- 2 Is a word/s open to interpretation?
- 3 Is the language age appropriate? Will the learner be able to read and comprehend the question?
- 4 Is the language appropriate for respondents with low-literacy levels or English as an additional language?
- 5 Avoid technical language or jargon.
- 6 Do not use acronyms. Make sure they are presented in full, even where they may seem obvious.



You need to ensure your questionnaire does not take too long to complete. **Timing** is very important if you want to get a good response rate (i.e. enough people completing and returning your questionnaire). It is good practice to develop a questionnaire that does not look too long and therefore off-putting. Even if you have very few questions, it may take some learners a long time to read the questions and provide an answer (especially if they are young). Ensuring your questionnaire can be carried out within a single lesson period is a good rule of thumb to follow. With parents/carers, older learners and staff, develop a questionnaire that takes a maximum of 20 – 30 minutes to complete.

Testing (or 'piloting') your questionnaire with people who are similar to your intended respondents can help you to refine and develop your questionnaire. Taking the example question about the school council above, you could ask school council members to test the questionnaire for you. It will enable you to check whether the questions make sense; that they are interpreted as intended; that you have not missed any obvious response options; that the questionnaire has a good structure and flow and does not take too long to complete.

For further information about involving young people in research, see NFER's Developing young researcher website (www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/developing-young-researchers). For more ideas on topics to research, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/ris

Sharing your research

It is good practice with any research to share your findings with your participants and stakeholders. It should be relatively easy to provide feedback to survey respondents within the school community, but ensure you do not inadvertently identify any individuals in your reporting. When presenting your survey findings, it is a good idea to state how the research will inform future planning or make a difference within the school. This will help encourage participants to engage in future surveys or research because they can see how their views have contributed to school developments or decisions.

Research ideas

The list of topics to explore in a questionnaire survey is endless. Here are some possible research questions³:

- Is bullying a problem within this school?
- What are learners' views on their GCSE option choices?
- How can the sixth form common room better meet learner's needs?
- How do parents/carers like to receive information from school?
- What, if anything, are staff's training needs?
- In what ways can governors get more involved in day-to-day school life?

Other useful resources

We hope that this short guide to developing a questionnaire survey has whetted your appetite for carrying out your own research. NFER has published a series of 'How to' guides for practitioners who want to carry out their own research, helping you put your ideas into practice. NFER have research books and training days available as well as free guidance on topics to research and methods of research. Why not get recognition for your achievements in research in your school, college or early years setting by applying for the NFER Research Mark? Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/ris for more information.

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Appendix A: Different types of response options

A list of possible response options are presented below. Five, four and three point scales are presented, along with dichotomous responses (i.e. two opposing response options). This is not an exhaustive list. You must ensure your response options are fit for purpose and relate to your question stem.

Five point scale examples

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Very important	Quite important	Fairly important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
Excellent	Above average	Average	Below average	Extremely poor
Definitely	Probably	Possibly	Probably not	Definitely not
Much more	More	About the same	Less	A lot less
Much better	Somewhat better	Stayed the same	Somewhat worse	Much worse
Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Very often	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Very useful	Quite useful	Somewhat useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful
A great deal	A fair amount	A little	Not very much	Not at all
Very difficult	Difficult	Mixed views	Easy	Very easy
Very confident	Fairly confident	Mixed views	Not very confident	Not at all confident
Very well informed	Well informed	Mixed views	Not well informed	Not at all informed



Four point scale examples

Most of the time	Some of the time	Hardly ever	Seldom
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Definitely	Probably	Probably not	Definitely not
Very clear	Quite clear	Not very clear	Very unclear
Exceeded expectations	Met expectations	Nearly met expectations	Did not meet expectations
Definitely will	Probably will	Probably will not	Definitely will not
Most days (5 days or more)	Some days (less than 5 days)	Not very often (less than once a week)	Never
Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not at all important
Most of the time	Some of the time	Not very often	Never

Three point scale examples

More	About right	Less
Too much	About right	Too little
Too strict	About right	Not strict enough
Extremely	Moderately	Not at all
Agree	Neither agree not disagree	Disagree
Often	Sometimes	Never
Good	Fair	Poor
Very important	Quite important	Not at all important
Yes	Not sure/Don't know	No

Dichotomous scales

Yes	No
True	False
Fair	Unfair
Agree	Disagree

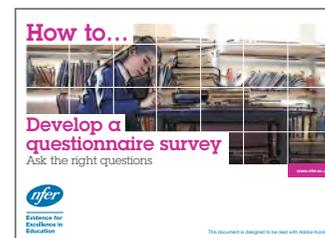
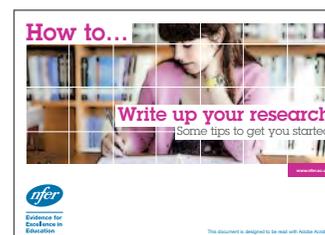
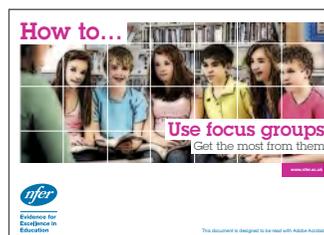
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'How to' Guides



The NFER 'How to' guides are a quick and easy way to digest different aspects of research.

Written by NFER researchers, these guides will help practitioners run research projects in education. From definitions and benefits, through to potential pitfalls, they will ensure the research is based on professional guidance.



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National Foundation for Educational Research
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks, SL1 2DQ

T +44 (0)1753 637007
F +44 (0)1753 790114
E products@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

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