# Creating a user feedback survey – ten top tips

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It is important to routinely gather feedback on our statistical products and services, so we can ensure they are relevant and fit for purpose.

Surveys allow us to reach out to lots of users at once. We can use surveys to gather information about who our users are, how they use our products and how our products and services could be improved. Surveys are not, and should not, be the only way we seek feedback.

We need to remember that filling in surveys is an extra burden for our users.

Colleagues from across the GSS have collaborated to develop ten top tips for designing user feedback surveys and some extra advice on questionnaire design. This guidance supports the implementation of the [User Engagement Strategy for Statistics](https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/user-engagement-strategy-for-statistics-ensuring-official-statistics-meet-societys-need/).

## 1. Establish your purpose and need

Specify your requirements. It could make or break your piece of work. It will also help inform the question design and the communication platforms you use to promote the survey. For example:

* Why are you conducting a survey?
* What sort of information do you need?
* Why do you need this information and when?
* Will you need both quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) questions to get the information you want?
* What decisions will be made as a result of the information you receive?
* Who is the audience you want to reach out to?
* How will you analyse the information you collect? Who will analyse it? When?
* How do you intend to use the feedback you receive?
* How will you publish or share the findings of this survey with users?

This information can take time to establish and document, but it is time well spent. Documenting the answers to these questions will help avoid irrelevant questions and irrelevant surveys.

Ask yourself “What actual tangible data do I need out of the end of this survey to be able to answer the questions I have?” Otherwise, you may conduct the survey and realise that some of your questions tell you nothing useful.

Each survey question should directly relate to these requirements.

Ask only what you need to know to minimise burden.

## 2. Plan ahead

Think about what other decisions you need to make.

* How will you identify and contact users and potential users of your statistics?
* How will you encourage your users to take part in the survey?
* What software platform will you use?
* When will you conduct the survey to make best use of the information you receive?
* How long will the survey be ‘live’?
* How much time will you need to develop questions and adapt them to the software you are using?
* Will you promote or host the survey on different channels?

Consider the level of detail and type of information you need about the respondent. For example, do you need to know specifics about:

* the respondent’s job role?
* which organisation they work in?
* how the respondent uses your data or statistics?
* reasons why they don’t use your statistics and what they use instead?

Or more general information such as:

* the type of organisation the respondent works in
* whether respondents are responding in a personal or professional capacity
* the publications the respondent generally uses
* how often the respondent uses your statistics

Are there any successful feedback surveys or questions within your organisation that you can re-use?

## 3. Reflect on respondents’ needs

Each respondent will have needs too. Addressing those needs will help and encourage people to participate in your survey.

Try to use multiple platforms and channels to reach your audience. For example, consider using existing forums to promote the survey and social media. Don’t insist on the exclusive use of one channel or short, inflexible deadlines.

Give respondents the opportunity to explain what their issues or frustrations are. For example, if they answer ‘Dissatisfied’, or ‘Very dissatisfied’ to any of the questions, allow a free text box for them to explain what the problems are.

## 4. Keep it short (and simple!)

Clarity and comprehension are paramount.

Creating content with the appropriate tone, reading age and language, reduces the burden on the respondent.

Use the correct accessibility standards in all communications [LINK].

Give the questionnaire a clear flow. Include section headers where appropriate to group related questions together.

## 5. Give clear instructions

Make your survey as easy to use as possible. This will reduce respondent burden and increase inclusivity.

Each question should clearly state what is required. For example:

* ‘Please select one option’
* ‘Select one item per row’
* ‘Select all that apply’
* ‘Please select one response for each statistical product you have used in the last year. If you have not used the product in the last year, please select N/A.’

## 6. Be realistic

Ask questions in user surveys that you can act on.

Give respondents the opportunity to explain what their issues or frustrations are, and to give you a full understanding of the issues.

Be realistic about what you have time to analyse in terms of free text responses.

Be realistic about what is achievable and be honest with users about what is not.

## 7. Say thank you!

Add a thank you to respondents for completing the survey.

## 8. Take time to review

Test the survey with a small-scale pilot before you roll it out. Bad questionnaires waste participants’ time and won’t give you quality data to act on.

Ideally, test the survey with a handful of users, but otherwise use colleagues from within your organisation.

If you haven’t got time or resource to test the survey, consider an expert review.

Before you do any testing on others, check your original documented requirements. Remove any:

* unnecessary questions
* unnecessary text
* unnecessary abbreviations
* emotional words that may bias responses
* ambiguous words such as ‘regularly’ that may be interpreted differently by different respondents

Then double-check:

* Does every question stem match its response scale? (see design section 4)
* Does every question only ask one thing? (see design section 2)

## 9. Reflect, learn and share

Regularly review your engagement processes. Ask yourself, “What is going well?” and “How can we improve this?”.

Seek feedback on all your engagement activities and your work programme from your team, your statistics users, and other producers of statistics.

Take the user needs which you have discovered from your survey results and share them. Share them with:

* your team
* your organisation
* your user engagement champion and the wider champion network
* your users

Use these insights to tailor the content and format of your statistical products, so they target and satisfy different audiences. The [Office for National Statistics’ user personas](https://style.ons.gov.uk/category/writing-for-the-web/personas/) are a helpful guide to different audience types and the [Government Digital Service Standard](https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/service-standard) provides a useful framework for ensuring our work is underpinned by user needs.

Regularly review and update your user lists – keep adding to these as you continue to identify new users of your statistics. Think about different methods and channels you can use to extend your reach and target potential users of your statistics.

Reinforce good behaviours and celebrate your successes.

## 10. Stay in touch

Continue the feedback loop. Focus on building lasting relationships with users through regular contact. Have open and honest discussions to help build trust.

* Report back on the impact of respondents’ contributions - publicise what has changed or will change as a result of the user survey.
* Be specific about the options and scope for further change.
* Make yourself easy to approach - use different channels to encourage users and potential users of your statistics to get in touch with you.

For example:

* Adopt a ‘you said, we did’ approach. This means seeking feedback at regular intervals and ensuring that the user knows their feedback is welcomed and valued.
* Consider if it is appropriate to address users’ needs more widely with a follow-up webinar or blog post.
* Make use of online user forums like [StatsUserNet](https://www.statsusernet.org.uk/login). This is an interactive website encouraging communication between users and producers of statistics.

# Thinking about questionnaire design – five practical pointers

1. [Start at the beginning…](#_Start_at_the)
2. [Plan the order of your questions](#_Plan_the_order)
3. [Keep it all short and simple](#_Keep_it_all)
4. [Consider your question types and styles](#_Consider_your_question)
5. [Don’t forget the finishing touches](#_Don’t_forget_the)

## Start at the beginning…

Tailor the content and layout of the survey questions to suit your mode of delivery

* For online surveys, aim to make your questions easy to read and answer on a ‘smartphone’.
* Use white space between questions and sections on a paper version.

A user centred title and description can work well to help personalise the experience. You could address the respondent directly in the title. For example:

* ‘Your feedback on [xxxxxx] statistics’

Include an introduction with some information about the survey’s purpose, data confidentiality and data use. Consider adding a call to action in the introduction too. For example:

* ‘Please provide your views to help us ensure that we are meeting our users’ needs.’

Be open and honest about:

* how long it is likely to take to complete the survey
* whether it is mandatory to answer all questions

This can help the respondent to decide a time and place that is convenient for them to complete the questionnaire.

## Plan the order of your questions…

Aim for between [6 to 8] survey questions; no more than [?].

Put related questions together, under sub-headings.

Start with simple to answer questions to ease the respondent in gently. For example, ask about:

* the type of organisation they work in
* the publications they generally use
* the frequency of use

Save longer, more detailed questions until the end.

## Keep it all short and simple

Long questions are burdensome to read and can be difficult for the respondent to understand.

Use clear simple language throughout the questionnaire:

* Aim for a reading age of around 9 years (the UK average), although this will not always be possible.
* Test for reading age compliance using free online software such as the [Hemingway App](http://www.hemingwayapp.com/).
* Avoid jargon and unexplained acronyms.

Make each question about one and only one topic.

For example, do not ask:

* How well do our statistics meet your needs and how could they be improved?
* Response option: [free text box]

Instead ask these two questions:

* How well do our statistics meet your needs?
  + Response options: Fully meet my needs; partially meet my needs, do not meet my needs
  + How could our statistics be improved?
  + Response option: [free text box]

## Consider your question type and style

Use a mixture of open and close-ended questions

* + Close-ended questions are useful for gathering demographic information about the respondent. They also allow quick and easy analysis. Improving our understanding of who the user is and whether they are using our statistics for professional or personal capacity can be useful.
  + Open-ended questions are useful for understanding specific feedback and improvements.

**Likert scales**: To optimise analysis, consider using a 5- or 7-point Likert scale [LINK] with response options equally spread over positive and negative outcomes. For example:

* + How often do you use this statistical product?
  + Very frequently
  + Frequently
  + Sometimes
  + Hardly ever
  + Never

**Binary responses**: To delve into detailed elements of say, satisfaction with the frequency of the statistics you produce, consider using an agree and disagree style question. This will force a response for each element. For example:

* + Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the frequency of [name of statistics]
  + The frequency of publications meets my needs: Agree or Disagree
  + I would be happy with less detailed publications if they were more frequent – Agree or Disagree
* Do you have any comments about the frequency of [name of statistics]? – free text box response

**Free text boxes:** To capture specific comments and allow respondents to explain their issues and frustrations you can use free text boxes. Make sure they are big enough to allow a full reply to the question.

* If the box is too small, text is lost as you type. That makes it hard for the respondent to see what they’ve written and proofread what they’ve typed.

For example, you could ask:

* + What information did you want from this report?
    - Drop down list with ‘Other, please specify’ option
  + Did the report provide everything that you needed?
    - Yes or No
  + What else did you need, if anything?
    - Free text box

Remember that free text boxes are more burdensome for respondents and increase the risk of non-response. Free text is also time consuming to analyse.

**Drop down lists:** Consider if you can replace free text boxes with a pre-populated drop-down list of popular response options.

* Remember to include an ‘Other, please specify’ or ‘None of the above’ options as a catch-all to a drop-down list

Other, please specify tends to invite concise answers; ‘Other, please give further details’ invites a longer response.

**Always match your question stem and the response categories:** It can be helpful, for consistency purposes, to match the answering scales throughout the survey, but it is not essential.

It is essential to make sure that the response options you provide make sense in light of the question being asked though. Either rewrite the question stem or amend the response scale to ensure the question and answers match. For example, the questions below, as written, need different response scales:

* + Please rate each of these statistical publications in terms of the clarity of the information provided.
    - Very clear
    - Quite clear
    - Neither clear nor unclear
    - Quite unclear
    - Very unclear
    - Don’t know
    - Not applicable
  + Please rate each of these statistical publications in terms of how well they meet your needs.
    - Very well
    - Quite well
    - Neither well nor poorly
    - Quite poorly
    - Very poorly
    - Don’t know
    - Not applicable

It is useful to include an ‘Any other comments’ question at the end of the survey.

* This ensures the respondent gets a forum to raise anything not covered by the questions.

It can be frustrating for the respondent if they have something to say but nowhere to say it.

## Don’t forget the finishing touches…

Thank respondents for their participation and include your contact details if possible.

You can also invite respondents to leave their email addresses for you to follow up with them. If you do this, it is worth explaining:

* what could be involved
* how often they are likely to receive emails

For example, would this be to:

* verify a response?
* invite them to a follow-up session?
* keep them up to date with news and development of the statistics?

Be specific! A respondent may be willing to sign up to occasional emails, but be more reluctant to attend a follow-up focus group.