

A guide to developing effective questionnaires

About this resource

This step-by-step guide provides resources and advice on developing effective questionnaires. It is designed for service providers and agency leaders in the child and youth mental health and addictions sector.

Throughout this resource, you will find practical tips on:

- Embedding Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism (EDIA-R) when designing your questionnaires, to ensure cultural relevance and minimize bias in the data collection process.
- Co-developing questionnaires with young people and family members to ensure a more accurate and meaningful data collection process.

What is a questionnaire?

A questionnaire is a data collection method designed to be administered consistently to a large group of people.¹ Questionnaires can use various formats, including traditional paper-and-pen forms and online surveys. Typically, questionnaires consist of:



Close-ended questions, prompting respondents to select from pre-defined answer options. For example: “How often do you exercise per week?” (Options: Never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5 or more times a week).



Open-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide free-form responses in their own words. For example: “What motivates you to maintain a regular exercise routine?”



A mix of both types of questions.



Close-ended questions work best for collecting demographic data, gathering opinions and attitudes, and examining how different factors, such as behaviours, preferences, and characteristics relate.



Open-ended questions allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. This helps you to gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives, potentially capturing valuable information that may not be revealed with close-ended questions.

Strengths and limitations

Questionnaires can ensure consistency in questions and responses and allow you to quantify your data for statistical analysis, making them valuable for comparing responses across different groups or time periods. For example, questionnaires can be used to assess a workshop's effectiveness by measuring participants' satisfaction levels and gathering feedback on the content and delivery.

However, like any tool, questionnaires have their strengths and limitations.

Strengths:

- Are ideal for collecting data quickly and anonymously from a large group.²
- Ensure question and response consistency for reliable results.²
- Collect numerical data that can be analyzed to identify patterns and trends over different groups or time periods.²

Limitations:

- Close-ended nature can limit respondents' ability to express specific experiences.²
- Poorly constructed questions can reduce the validity and reliability of results.²
- Data may lack contextual information and be prone to self-reported bias.²

Validity = the accuracy of a measure; it refers to how well a questionnaire measures what it is intended to measure.¹

Reliability = the consistency of a measure; it refers to the extent to which the same results can be obtained using the same questionnaire under consistent conditions.¹

This is where the art of mixing methods comes in. Combining your questionnaires with other qualitative data collection methods, such as focus groups and interviews, can help address limitations and provide a more in-depth and comprehensive dataset.

Questionnaires are most effective when timing, population characteristics, and accessibility are carefully considered in the design and administration stages. This approach will help optimize response rates and data quality.¹

- Timely administration ensures that respondents are available and receptive, increasing the likelihood of good-quality responses.²
- Tailoring your questionnaires to the target population's language, literacy levels, and cultural norms can enhance participants' understanding and engagement.³
- Providing accessible questionnaire formats allows all participants to share easily.³



However, it's important to be mindful of 'questionnaire fatigue', which refers to the decreased interest and attention of respondents as they progress through a lengthy questionnaire. To mitigate this, strive to keep your questionnaire concise, relevant, and engaging. Consider using visual aids, breaking up long sections, and using a variety of question types to maintain participants' interests and the quality of the data you collect.

How do I develop my questionnaire?

Before you begin, consider the benefits of exploring what's already out there. By searching for already-existing standardized measures, you can save yourself valuable time and resources. These proven measures can provide a solid foundation for your research, ensure you follow best practices, and achieve the most accurate results possible.

If you can't find a tool that meets your needs, you may need to develop your questionnaire from the ground up. The following steps will guide you through this process.

Define your objectives

Start by clarifying your reasons for developing the questionnaire. Consider the following questions:

- Why are you developing this questionnaire?
- What specific information do you hope to gather from this questionnaire?
- How will the results help you improve your programs or services?

Gather your team

Next, bring your team together. Involving key partners early on can help ensure your questionnaire is relevant, comprehensive, and well-received. In this stage, consider the following questions:

- Who are your key partners in this process (project team, clients, agency and system leaders, service providers, young people, and family members)?
- How and to what extent are they engaged?
- What are the best ways to collaborate with young people and family members?



Our [measures database](#) can be a helpful resource for this purpose. Check if other agencies in the sector have done similar work or have relevant data that could help you.

Identify your target audience

The next step is to define who you want to complete your questionnaire:

- Who are they?
- How can you customize the questionnaire to meet your audience's needs?
- How can you make questionnaires more accessible?

Begin with an EDIA-R lens

Taking a collaborative and culturally sensitive approach will help you create a questionnaire that reflects the specific experiences and perspectives of diverse communities.

To ensure your questionnaire is culturally relevant and accurately represents the diverse demographic of your target audience, collaborate with community partners to understand and incorporate the cultural nuances, values, and communication styles of different groups. You can use inclusive outreach materials that resonate with various cultural contexts and engage with community organizations and advocacy groups to ensure the questions are culturally relevant and respectful.

- Co-develop with professionals, young people, and family members from diverse backgrounds before finalizing your questionnaire to improve its inclusivity.
- Use inclusive language that is respectful of all identities.
- If feasible within your budget, offer multiple language options for your questionnaire to reach a broader audience. When working with limited budgets, prioritize key languages based on your target population's needs.
- Provide straightforward and easy-to-understand instructions for all respondents.
- Ensure your questions are relevant and respectful of your respondents' cultural norms and values. By piloting the questionnaire with diverse respondents to gather feedback on cultural relevance and appropriateness.
- Provide respondents with the option to skip questions they are uncomfortable answering or that do not apply to them.
- Ensure your questionnaire is accessible to individuals with disabilities. Use accessible formats (large print, audio versions) and ensure online questionnaires are compatible with screen readers or other assistive technologies. We have included some [additional guidelines](#) on creating accessible resources you can refer to for detailed best practices.



Case Study

The Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (the Knowledge Institute) hosted a “Spotlight on COVID-19 Recovery Webinar Series” in response to the needs of agency partners. This series explored current evidence and initiatives and addressed key pandemic-related issues, such as managing screen time and navigating hybrid workspaces, as the sector transitioned to a recovery state.

Our COVID webinars brought together 266 attendees – young people, family members, agency leaders, service providers, and knowledge experts – to share their diverse lived expertise, insights, and real-world strategies. We involved these partners throughout the questionnaire development process, which helped capture various perspectives and ensured the questionnaire addressed the audience’s needs.

Following the webinar series, we distributed a questionnaire to the participants to:

- Assess their satisfaction with the webinar series.
- Gather feedback on webinar content and delivery.
- Identify areas for improvement for future webinar sessions.

The questionnaire was designed using clear language and was kept short, requiring minimal time to complete.

Design your questionnaire

Involving your team members in the design process is important to creating a good questionnaire. When deciding on the types of questions to include, you should consider factors like your research or evaluation objectives, your target audience’s characteristics, and the desired length of your questionnaire.

Developing a questionnaire is a collaborative activity, so working closely with your team will help ensure the best possible outcome.



Case Study

The questionnaire for our COVID webinar series was structured to consider the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants. It included a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions to collect feedback on the relevance of the topics, the clarity of the presentation, and the effectiveness of the shared strategies.



Examples of the **close-ended** questions in our questionnaire:

1. Overall, how satisfied were you with the information shared in the webinar?
 - Very dissatisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Neutral
 - Satisfied
 - Very satisfied
2. How easy or difficult was it to sign up for our webinar?
 - Very difficult
 - Somewhat difficult
 - Neither difficult nor easy
 - Somewhat easy
 - Very easy
3. How accurate was the session description?
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
 - Very poor



Examples of the **open-ended** questions in the questionnaire:

- Please share your thoughts on the strengths of the webinar and how it was helpful.
- Please share your thoughts on areas for improvement to improve future webinars in this series.
- Please provide your input on the topics or areas you would like to see covered in future webinars.



Tips for designing your questionnaire

- Use clear language to ensure participants understand what you are asking.¹
- Minimize open-ended questions to make it easier for respondents to complete the questionnaire.³
- Avoid double-barreled questions and ask for only one thing at a time in a question to avoid confusion.¹
- Keep your questionnaire short to prevent respondent fatigue and inattention.⁴ Ideally, an online survey should take between 10 and 15 minutes to complete, with 7 to 10 questions.⁵ For virtual or telephone questionnaires, aim for no more than 30 minutes.⁶ If long interviews are needed to complete your questionnaire, consider dividing them into multiple 30-minute sessions to maintain respondent engagement and ensure quality responses.⁶
- Involve key partners in the design process. This can help tailor the questions to suit the needs and preferences of your target audience, ultimately improving the quality of the data collected.⁷

Pilot-test your questionnaire

Before sending it to a larger group, administer your questionnaire to a small group. You can use their feedback to improve and update your questionnaire as needed.¹ This will allow you to enhance its validity and reliability to ensure it effectively captures the information you need.¹ For example, feedback from the pilot group might show that certain questions are confusing for a specific age group or that some response options are unclear and need to be revised. Additionally, pilot testing allows you to determine how long it takes participants to complete the questionnaire, enabling you to make necessary adjustments if the completion time is too long.



Case Study

Our COVID webinar questionnaire was tested with the Knowledge Institute project team before being sent to the webinar participants. This process helped the team identify improvement areas, including ensuring smooth technical operation and making the questionnaire more accessible to maximize its user-friendliness.

How do I administer a questionnaire?

Now that you've developed your questionnaire, it's time to share it with your audience and gather the data you need. Before you do this, ask yourself the following questions:

Do I need to consider ethics?

- Depending on the nature of your research project, you may need approval from your Research Ethics Board (REB) before administering your questionnaire. REB approval ensures participants' safety, welfare, and rights; the ethical soundness of the research; informed consent; confidentiality; and compliance with legal and ethical standards.⁸ You should always consult your institutional policy to determine if REB approval is necessary. In general, REB approval is required if your questionnaire:
 - Collects personally identifiable or sensitive data, including demographic or health information.
 - Contributes to a research study intended to produce generalizable knowledge, with results that may be published or shared beyond the immediate study.
- REB approval may not be necessary for internal program evaluations, quality improvement projects, or surveys that do not involve collecting sensitive or personal information (for example, a satisfaction survey). However, it is best practice to refer to your institutional REB guidelines and ensure:
 - Participants give their informed consent and understand the purpose of the project, their rights, and their ability to withdraw at any point.
 - Confidentiality is safeguarded, and participants' identities remain anonymous, protecting their data according to relevant regulations and guidelines.

What delivery methods should I use?

- To reach your target audience effectively, consider using a combination of approaches, such as online surveys, paper questionnaires, and virtual or telephone interviews. When using online surveys, be aware of potential issues such as bots, problematic respondents, and technology barriers for those without reliable internet access. Implement measures like CAPTCHA to mitigate bot responses and protect your data quality. For more details, refer to our resource on [gathering and cleaning online survey data](#).
- To ensure higher participation, tailor your delivery methods to the preferences and accessibility needs of your target audience.
- To help increase the response rates to your questionnaire, collaborate with partners to access their networks and resources.

When is the best time to administer a questionnaire?

- Consider the availability and willingness of your target audience to participate.
- Avoid busy times like holidays or school breaks.
- Choose times when your respondents might be more flexible and more likely to provide meaningful responses.

How long should a questionnaire be open?

- The time period to keep a questionnaire open depends on your objectives and target audience.
- You should consider factors such as response rates, timing, and the need for a sufficient sample size.
- Aim for a balance between giving participants enough time to respond and not keeping the questionnaire open for a prolonged period so that it loses relevance. Ideally, your questionnaire should be open for 2-3 weeks, with reminder emails sent periodically to encourage participation.

Administering questionnaires after events

Consider carefully the timing for administering questionnaires after events.

- Administering your questionnaire right after the event can capture immediate feedback from your respondents when their experiences are fresh.
- On the other hand, waiting a bit to administer a questionnaire can allow participants to reflect on their experience and potentially provide more thoughtful feedback.

To determine the best time to administer your questionnaire, consider factors such as:

- The number of participants.
- The length of your questionnaire.
- The length of time your questionnaire will remain open.
- The audience and their likely response patterns.
- How quickly your team needs the data and participant feedback.



How can you improve your questionnaire response rates? Here are some tips!

- Send a direct invitation email with a personalized invitation message and include an active hyperlink to your questionnaire.⁹
- Design your questionnaire to be user-friendly, with clear instructions and an appealing layout.⁹
- Consider offering incentives to the respondents to complete the survey. Assure participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.¹⁰
- Use multiple communication channels to reach a wider audience. Engage partners to help distribute your questionnaire.¹¹
- Implement follow-up strategies before closing the questionnaire, including reminder emails or phone calls.¹¹
- Always send thank-you messages after the questionnaire response period ends, to thank respondents for sharing their time and responses!⁹

Additional resources



- Our program [evaluation toolkit](#) at the Knowledge Institute can be a helpful tool to refer to when developing your questionnaire.
- Learn more about [questionnaire design](#) with Statistics Canada.
- This [tip sheet](#) provides additional tips on refining the question wording of your questionnaires.
- Check out our website and learn how to [gather and clean your online survey data](#).
- If you are developing a questionnaire for young people, here are some [tips](#) on tailoring your questionnaires specifically for them.
- For more questionnaire administration tips, see this [general guide](#) by the University of British Columbia.

Summary

Collecting accurate and meaningful data is crucial if you're working on a research or evaluation project. To do that, you need a well-designed questionnaire.

Following the principles outlined in this guide, you can create a questionnaire that effectively engages your respondents and gives you the feedback you need to improve. The clarity of your questions, options to respond, the order of the questions, and inclusivity are critical in ensuring your questionnaire hits the mark.

So, take the time to plan carefully. When done right, a well-designed questionnaire can be a powerful tool for reaching your research objectives and informing decision-making.

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