

AEA365: Carla Hillerns and Pei-Pei Lei on a Quest to Eliminate Double-Barreled Survey Questions

We are Carla Hillerns and Pei-Pei Lei from the [Office of Survey Research](#) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Health Policy and Research. We'd like to discuss a common mistake in surveys – double-barreled questions. As the name implies, a double-barreled question asks about two topics, which can lead to issues of interpretation as you're not sure if the person is responding to the first 'question', the second 'question' or both. Here is an example:

Was the training session held at a convenient time and location? Yes No

A respondent may have different opinions about the time and location of the session but the question only allows for one response. You may be saying to yourself, "I'd never write a question like that!" Yet double barreling is a very easy mistake to make, especially when trying to reduce the overall number of questions on a survey. We've spotted double (and even triple) barreled questions in lots of surveys – even validated instruments.

Hot Tips for Avoiding Double-Barreled Questions

1. **Prior to writing questions, list the precise topics to be measured.** This step might seem like extra work but can actually make question writing easier.
2. **Avoid complicated phrasing.** Using simple wording helps identify the topic of the question.
3. **Pay attention to conjunctions like "and" and "or."** A conjunction can be a red flag that your question contains multiple topics.
4. **Ask colleagues to review a working draft of the survey specifically for double-barreled questions (and other design problems).** We call this step "cracking the code" because it can be a fun challenge for internal reviewers.
5. **Test the survey.** Use cognitive interviews and/or pilot tests to uncover possible problems from the respondent's perspective. See [this](#) AEA365 post for more information on cognitive interviewing.

Rad Resource: Our go-to resource for tips on writing good questions is *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method* by Dillman, Smith & Christian.

Lessons Learned

1. **Never assume.** Even when we're planning on using a previously tested instrument, we still set aside time to review it for potential design problems.
2. **Other evaluators can provide valuable knowledge about survey design.** Double-barreled questions are just one of the many common errors in survey design. Other examples include leading questions and double negatives. We hope to see future AEA blogs that offer strategies to tackle these types of problems. Or please consider writing a comment to this post if you have ideas you'd like to share. Thank you!