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## Objection! That’s a Leading Survey Question by Carla Hillerns

I am **Carla Hillerns** from the [Office of Survey Research](#) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School’s [Center for Health Policy and Research](#). In 2015, my colleague and I shared a [post](#) about how to avoid using double-barreled survey questions. Today I’d like to tackle another pesky survey design problem – leading questions. Just as we don’t want lawyers asking leading questions during a direct examination of a witness, it’s also important to avoid leading survey respondents.

By definition, a leading question “guides” the respondent towards a particular answer. Poorly designed questions can create bias since they may generate answers that do not reflect the respondent’s true perspective. Using neutral phrasing helps uncover accurate information. Here are a few examples of leading questions as well as more neutral alternatives.

Leading Question	Alternative Wording	Reason for Change
“In general, how healthy are you?”	“In general, how would you rate your health?”	A health rating is neutral since it doesn’t lean in one direction (“healthy” vs. “unhealthy”).
“To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?”	“To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?”	Stating both sides of the agreement scale is preferable to including the positive side only.
“We encourage employees to enhance their skills. Would you be interested in receiving training?”	“Please rate your interest in receiving training?”	Avoid coercive language.

### Hot Tips for Avoiding Leading Questions:

1. **Before deciding to create a survey, ask yourself what you (or the survey sponsor) are trying to accomplish through the research.** Are you hoping that respondents will answer a certain way, which will support a particular argument or decision? Exploring the underlying goals of the survey may help you expose potential biases.
2. **Ask colleagues to review a working draft of the survey to identify leading questions.** As noted above, you may be too close to the subject matter and introduce your opinions through the question wording. A colleague’s “fresh set of eyes” can be an effective way to tease out poorly phrased questions.
3. **Test the survey.** Using cognitive interviews is another way to detect leading questions. This type of interview allows researchers to view the question from the perspective of the respondent (see [this](#) AEA365 post for more information).

**Rad Resource:** My go-to resource for tips on writing good questions continues to be [Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method](#) by Dillman, Smith & Christian.