

Tutorial 3: Writing clear questions

Human Computer Interaction

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Whenever you pose a question, task, or other statement to a user that statement must be clear and unambiguous. If some of your participants interpret a statement one way and others interpret it a different way then your results are no longer valid. But writing unambiguous questions and tasks can be surprisingly challenging.

In this tutorial we are going to look at an example survey and identify which are clear and which are ambiguous. The goal of this tutorial is for you to learn how to read through a set of questions or tasks with a critical eye and spot issues. The secondary goal is to get you ready to create study materials for coursework 2.

1 Fix a Survey

Your task today is to go through the questions on the accompanying survey, identify which questions are well designed and which need to be fixed. You will then work with a team to improve the questions in the survey so that they are clear and unambiguous.

The presented survey is somewhat nonsensical on purpose. That is, the questions make sense by themselves, but there is no clear research goal. The point is to get you to focus on the individual question wording.

Step 1: Everyone should take the survey in silence. You can make notes while doing this, but your primary goal is to take the survey like you were a real participant and try and answer the questions the best you can.

Step 2: Perform a cognitive-walkthrough type analysis of the survey.

A survey is a bit different than a user interface, so the questions you need to ask at each step are also somewhat different. For each question on the survey you should ask yourself the following questions.

1. Is the question text clear and easy to read for the target audience?
2. Is the question unambiguous? Will all participants interpret the question the same way?
3. Do the provided answer options or provided answer spaces make sense for this question? Is it clear what answer should be provided? (i.e. is it clear that the participant should write a number?)
4. Will participants have the ability to answer the question? Is answering the question truthfully easier

Step 3: Form a group of 2-4 students and try and re-design the survey text so that it is clearer and makes more sense. Discuss which questions are good already and which questions need to change.