The ultimate guide to multiple choice questions

Learn when and how to use the most popular type of survey question.
Why use multiple choice questions?

Multiple choice questions are elemental to survey writing. They’re versatile, intuitive, and they yield clean data that’s easy to analyze.

Since they provide a fixed list of answer options, they give you structured survey responses and make it easier for your respondents to complete the survey.

However, the data you get back are limited to the choices you provide. That means that if your answer options aren’t comprehensive, you risk bias in your results.

While it may be the question type that’s most straightforward, understanding the different types of multiple choice questions and their uses is more nuanced.

Pros

• Useful in many situations
• Easy to understand
• Yields data that are easy to analyze
• Best option for surveys taken on mobile

Cons

• Limits responses to a predetermined set of options
• Not effective at collecting qualitative data

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Question types: Single answer vs. multiple answer

One of the basic differences between types of multiple choice questions is whether to let respondents choose multiple response options or just one.
Single-answer questions

Single-answer questions, the most common type of question, ask respondents to pick just one choice from a predetermined list.

This format really shines in binary questions, questions with ratings or nominal scales. Someone can either agree or disagree with a statement, but he cannot do both; he can be at one point on a 10-point Net Promoter Score™ (NPS) scale, but not several—he can be a 7, but not a 7 and a 9.

Single-answer multiple choice questions are also effective when you’re asking respondents to pick their favorite or least-favorite option from a predetermined list, or when asking them to select the option that comes closest to their own opinion.

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Multiple-answer questions

Multiple-answer questions allow respondents to check off all the choices that apply to them instead of being forced to pick just one.

If a single-answer multiple choice question asks “What is your favorite pizza topping?” a multiple-answer multiple choice question might ask “Which of the following pizza toppings do you like?”

It’s up to you, writing the survey, to decide which form of the question is more relevant.

Net Promoter Score is a trademark of Satmetrix Systems, Inc., F. Reichheld, and Bain & Company.
Variations of the multiple choice question

Once you’ve determined whether you want your multiple choice question to have a single answer or multiple, you can decide whether you’d like to use one of the many variations of multiple choice questions.
The ‘other’ answer option

Adding an “other” answer option or comment field can solve a common drawback of using a multiple choice question.

When you give your respondents a fixed list of answer options, you’re forcing them to select only from the options you’ve provided, which can bias your results.

What if you don’t provide someone with the answer option he really wants to give? He may end up choosing an answer that he doesn’t agree with from your list of choices, which can affect the integrity of your results.

One way to address this problem is to provide several answer choices but still give respondents the option to write in their own answer. When you’re writing your survey, simply check the box “Add an ‘Other’ Answer Option or Comment Field.”

Respondents should see the “other” option as a last resort. If too many people write in their own responses, it will weaken the comparisons you can make between your main answer choices.
Variations of the multiple choice question

Rating scale questions

Rating scale questions display a scale of any range—from 0 to 10, 1 to 5, 0 to 100, etc.—and ask respondents to select the numerical point on the scale that best represents their response.

In order for respondents to understand a rating scale, you must make explicit the relationship between the numbers on the scale and the concepts they measure, either in the question or on the rating scale itself.

See our available benchmarks

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The examples above are different ways of writing the Net Promoter Score, “the likeliness to recommend” metric that’s used on anything from market research surveys to customer satisfaction and employee engagement surveys. Notice how both manage to give the respondent context.
Variations of the multiple choice question

**Likert scale questions**

A Likert scale or Likert-type scale asks respondents to pinpoint how much they agree or disagree with a statement.

Likert scales are perfect for measuring respondents’ attitudes or behaviors, particularly when they relate to sensitive subjects. The traditional **Likert scale** is one of the most used rating scales.

Here’s an example:

You can vary your response options to make the focus of your question more or less granular.

For example:

```markdown
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "There were enough toppings on my pizza."

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neutral
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
```

```markdown
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "There were enough toppings on my pizza."

- [ ] Strongly agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Agreed somewhat
- [ ] Neither agree or disagree
- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Disagree somewhat
```
Matrix questions

You may want to ask several questions in a row that each have the same response options. If this is the case for your survey, consider using a matrix.

For example, a series of Agree/Disagree questions, or a series of rating questions asking your respondents to pick the number from 1 to 10 that indicates how likely they are to recommend a product to a friend.

While matrix questions simplify the question content, very large matrices can be burdensome for respondents, especially on mobile devices. Respondents might abandon surveys that are difficult to complete, which can impact your completion rates.

If your matrix is so large that respondents will have to continuously scroll right or down, you should break up your questions or reduce the number of answer choices you provide, so that your survey is easier to complete.
Variations of the multiple choice question

Dropdown questions

Instead of displaying all of the answer choices beneath the question, the dropdown question gives respondents a scrollable list to select their answer from.

Dropdown questions work best for questions that have a long list of brief answer choices, such as asking a respondent for his home state or birth year.

They should be used sparingly. For most multiple choice questions, having all choices visible at the same time will give respondents context as they are answering the question.
Ranking questions

Ranking questions let your respondents choose the order of answer choices that best fit their opinions.

For example, asking respondents to rank their top five pizza toppings tells you not just whether someone likes pepperoni, but how much in relation to the other flavors available.

If you want to capture more information than you can from simple multiple choice questions, then a ranking question might be best for you.

Ranking questions are more difficult to analyze than regular multiple choice questions.

They give you a sense of whether a respondent likes one answer choice more than another, but they don’t tell you how much more. So unless you are specifically interested in respondents’ preferences at the individual level and not just on average,
The benefits of multiple choice questions

Multiple choice questions are the most common question type on SurveyMonkey. It’s not just because they’re the question type most people consider to be the “standard.” They also have specific advantages that other question types don’t.
The benefits of multiple choice questions

**They’re simple**

It’s much easier to click a button than to type in a response.

And the more accessible you make your survey the more completed responses you’ll get.

Oftentimes you’ll want to explicitly ask respondents to choose from two or more options: Do you agree or disagree? Yes or no? Do you think we should be doing more or less or that we’re doing the right amount?

In these cases, it’s best to provide the choices for your respondents to choose from.

The more accessible you make your survey the more completed responses you’ll get.

Want to learn more? Visit us at surveymonkey.com
The benefits of multiple choice questions

**They give response options**

**concrete definitions**

Often you’ll write survey questions with an idea of how respondents might answer. In situations like this, multiple choice is usually the best question type.

Let’s say you are asking people to pick which political candidate they’ll vote for. What if there are 20 candidates to choose from? Some respondents already know who they are going to vote for. They’ll have an easy time answering this question no matter what.

For most people, though, having the response options available in front of them will be a big help. It helps you, too. Analyzing data from closed-ended questions is easy, but sorting through answers to open-ended questions can take a lot more work.

It will make your life a lot easier when you can analyze your survey results without having to weed out responses with spelling mistakes or write-ins that aren't serious. That way, Mickey Mouse will never appear on your shortlist for the next president.
The ultimate guide to multiple choice questions

They help guide your respondents

One benefit of multiple choice options is that they give your respondents context for how they should answer.

Providing response options in a multiple choice format indicates how specific or general you want the respondents’ answers to be.

For example, does someone need to report his exact birthdate (January 3, 1975), or just the year (1975)? Response options can also subtly nudge your respondents to provide more details than they would on their own.

Think of a Likert scale. The more response options you provide, the more they are able to quantify how much they agree or disagree (i.e. “Agree,” “Agree strongly,” or “Agree somewhat”).

Think carefully about your multiple choice questions before you send out your survey because the answer options you provide will determine the ways you can use your results. For example, providing an “other” answer option may be convenient, but it might make it more difficult to analyze your data.
They look better on mobile devices

Mobile optimization is an important consideration in the survey world today.

Roughly 3 in 10 people taking SurveyMonkey surveys in the U.S. do so on a smartphone or tablet.

With such small screens and no mouse or keyboard to use, mobile devices aren’t good mediums for surveys that use text boxes or require a lot of scrolling. There’s a time and a place for open-ended answer options, but for mobile surveys we recommend that you stick with simple multiple choice options.

Make sure to read SurveyMonkey’s top tips for survey mobile optimization before designing your survey.

Survey on the go

Create, send, and analyze surveys anytime, anywhere with the SurveyMonkey mobile app.

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There’s a reason why multiple choice questions are so popular

They’re useful in a broad range of situations, and they’re especially valuable once you understand the subtleties of how to use each type.

Create your first survey today

Visit us at surveymonkey.com and sign up to get started.