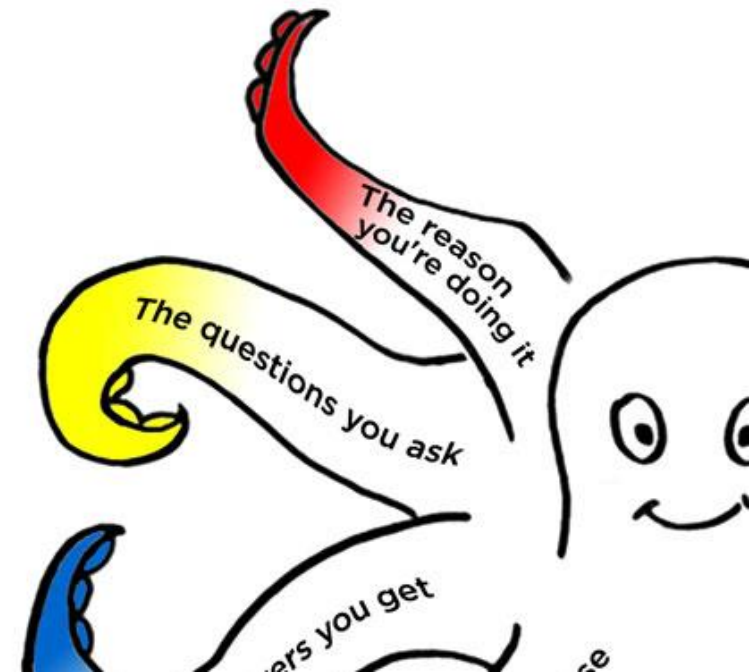


Use your plain language skills to improve your survey

8th Biannual Forum on PLAIN ENGLISH

Caroline Jarrett
@cjforms
#surveysthatwork2022



What would you do for a dollar?

\$1 in the envelope beats \$10 guaranteed later



Response depends on effort, reward and trust

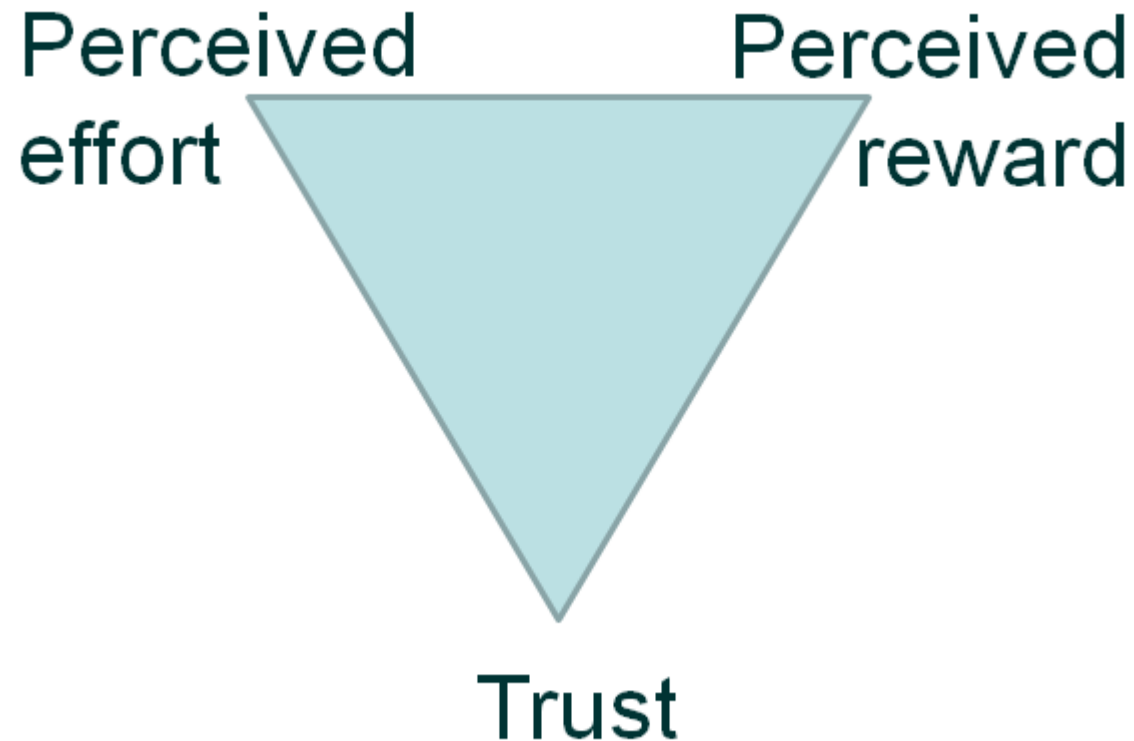
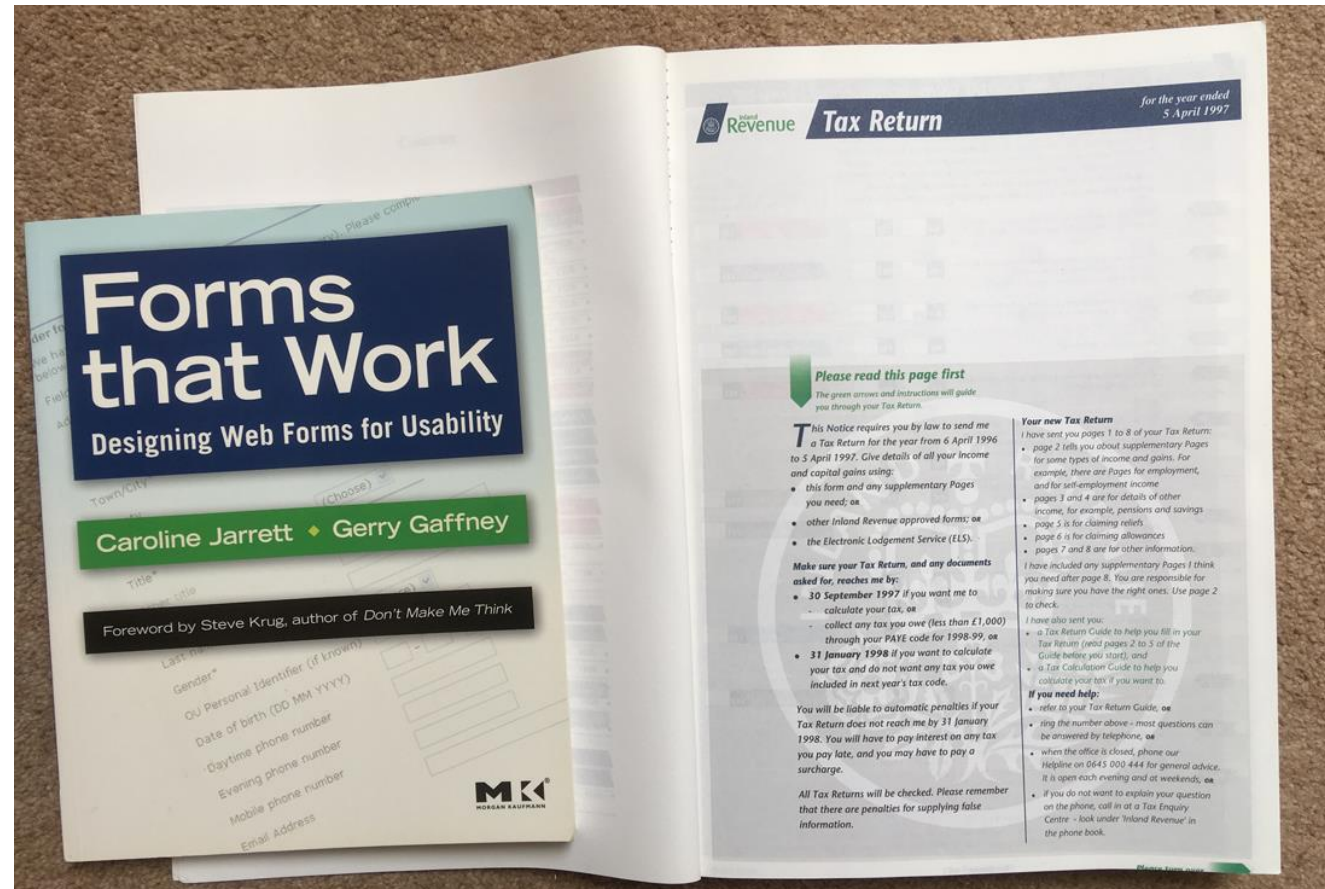


Diagram from Jarrett, C, and Gaffney, G (2008)
"Forms that work: Designing web forms for usability" inspired by Dillman, D.A. (2000)
"Internet, Mail and Mixed Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method"

I'm interested in questions because I've worked on forms for 30 years



I turned to the survey literature to learn more,
especially about questions



I learned that plain language skills are vital for surveys

- Think about audience and purpose
- Write questions that make sense
- Write questions that people can answer
- Rate your satisfaction

Think about audience and purpose

Audience and purpose are core to plain language

“The first rule of plain language is: **write for your audience ...**

The best way to grab and hold someone’s attention is to figure out who they are and what they want to know.”

[Write for your audience | plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)

Surveys turn “what they want to know” around

- When people read things, it's about what they want to know
- When we send them a questionnaire, we expect them to tell us what we want to know by answering our questions



I found this definition of “the survey”

The survey is a
systematic method
for gathering information from
(a sample of) entities
for the purpose of
constructing quantitative descriptors
of the attributes of the larger population
of which the entities are members.

I change the definition a bit

systematic method	becomes	process
gathering information	becomes	asking questions
entities	become	people
quantitative descriptors	become	numbers about
attributes of the larger population	become	make decisions

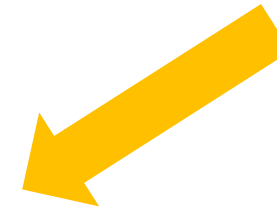
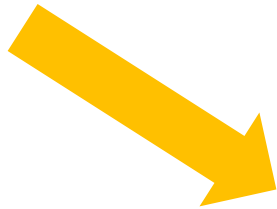
My definition focuses on process and decisions

The survey is a
process
of **asking questions**
that are answered by
(a sample of) a defined group of **people**
to get **numbers**
that you can use to **make decisions**

Start with “why” and “who”, end with the number

Why you want ask

Who you want to ask



The survey is a
process for getting
answers to questions



The number

Your plain language skills help with “who”

Why you want ask

Who you want to ask

The Survey

The number

Let's look a bit more into “why”

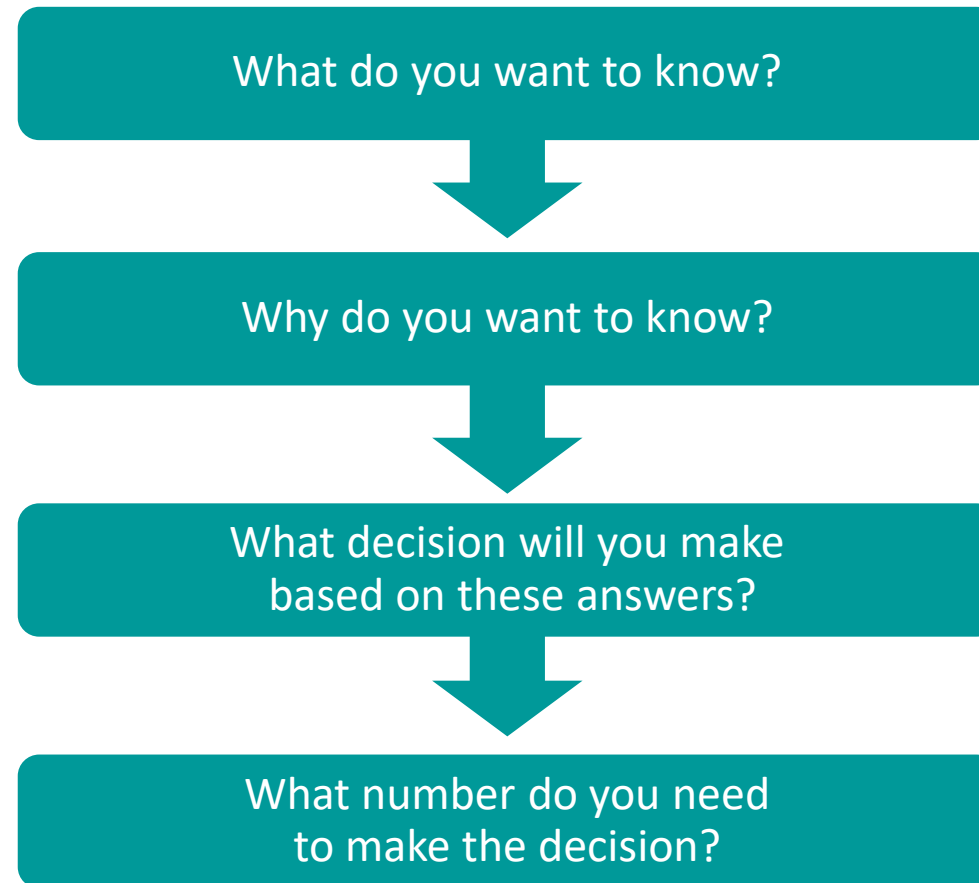
Why you want ask

Who you want to ask

The Survey

The number

I use these challenges to help with “why”



Let's try a typical example

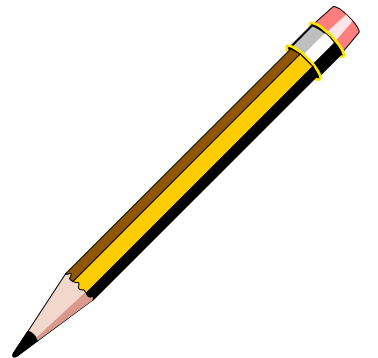
- What do you want to know?
- Why do you want to know?
- What decision will you make based on these answers?
- What number do you need to make the decision?

“ What users think of our new application process”

“ Do they like it?”

“ We’ll decide what changes we need to make”

please type suggestions in the chat



Takeaway

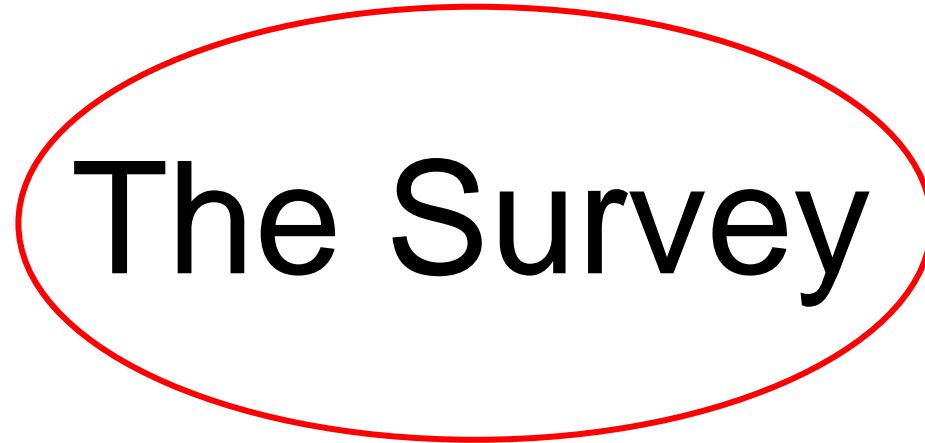
A survey is a quantitative method

If you don't need to get a number as the result then it's probably best to switch to a qualitative method such as interviews or usability testing

There's a lot to think about in the survey itself

Why you want ask

Who you want to ask

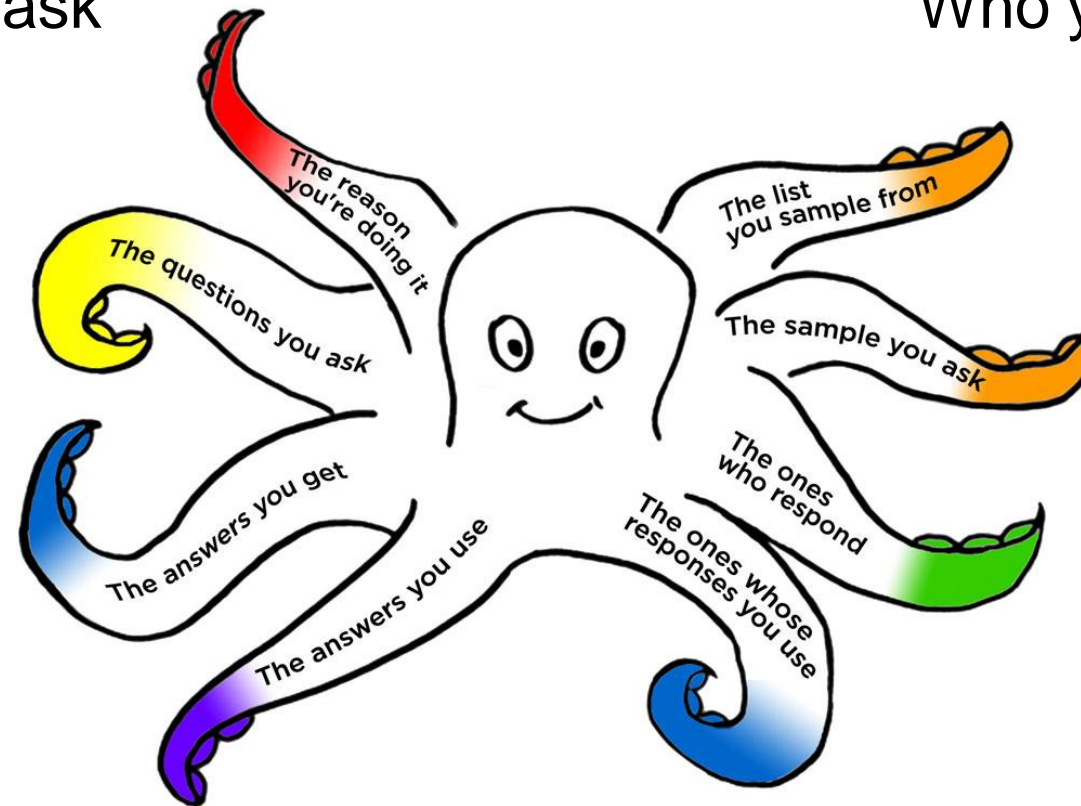


The number

I made a Survey Octopus of the topics

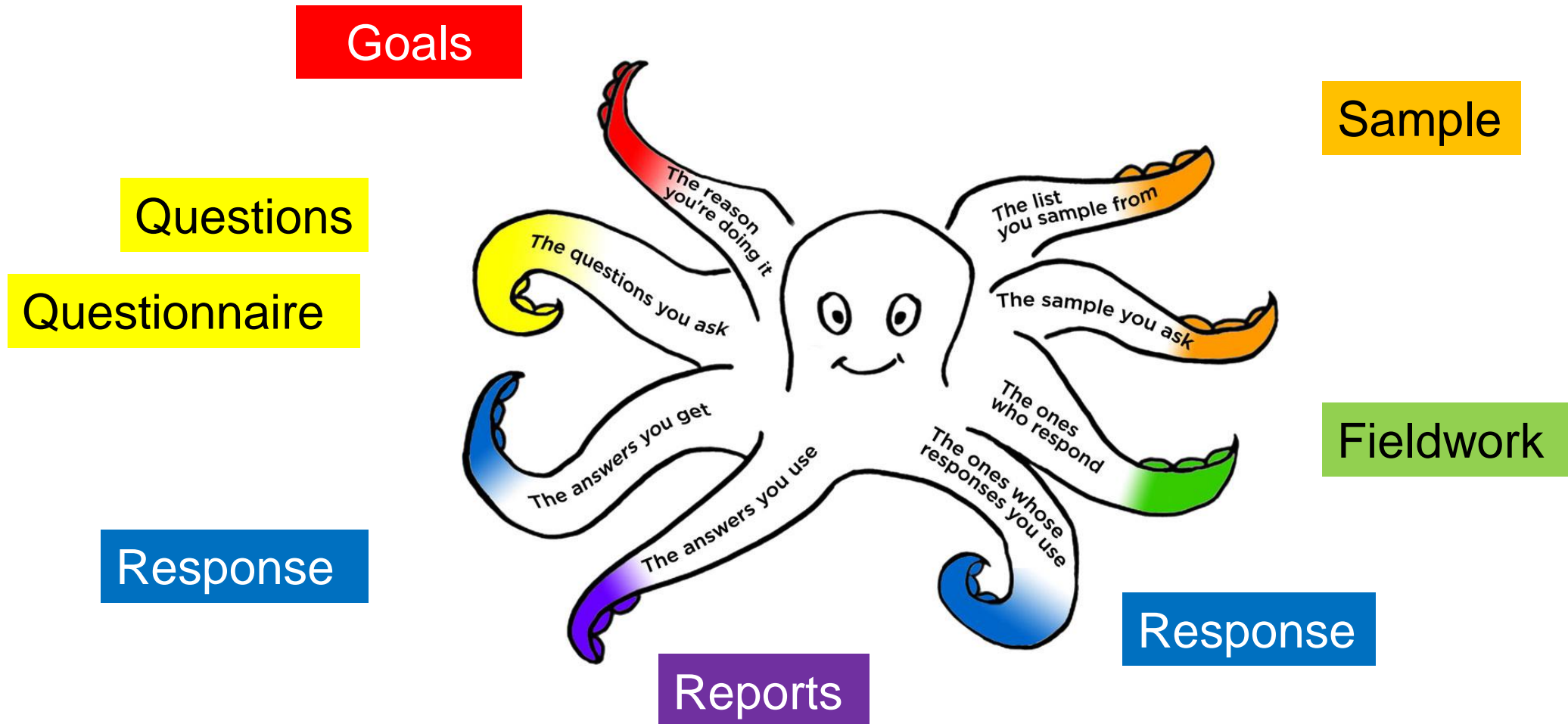
Why you want ask

Who you want to ask

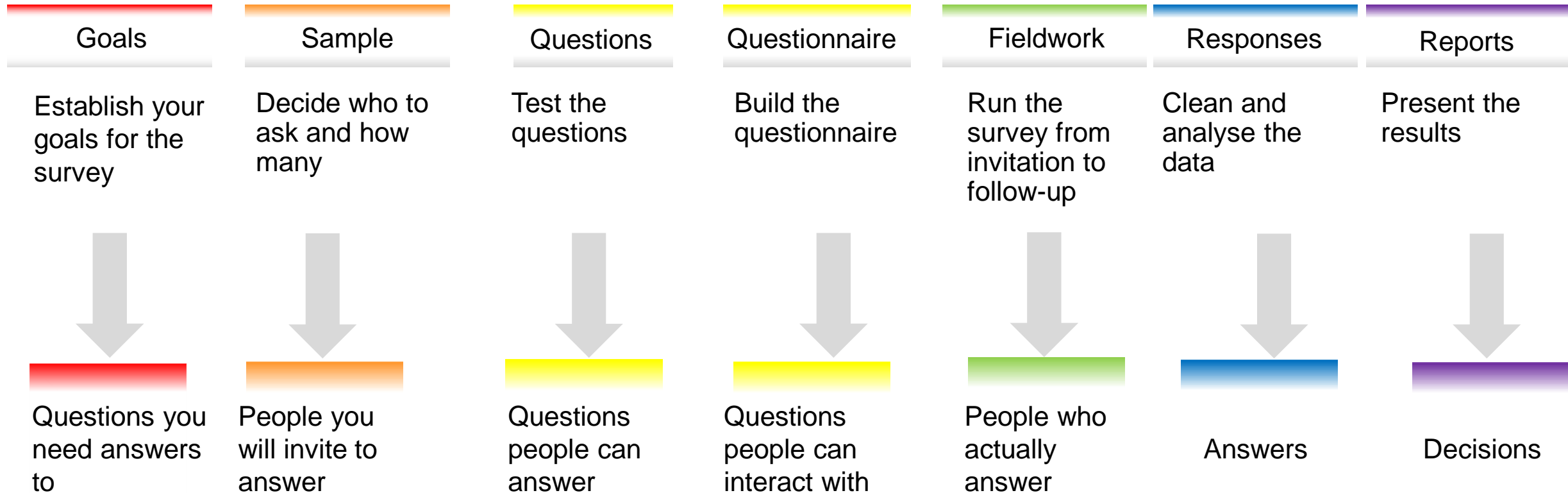


The number

The process works through from goals to reports

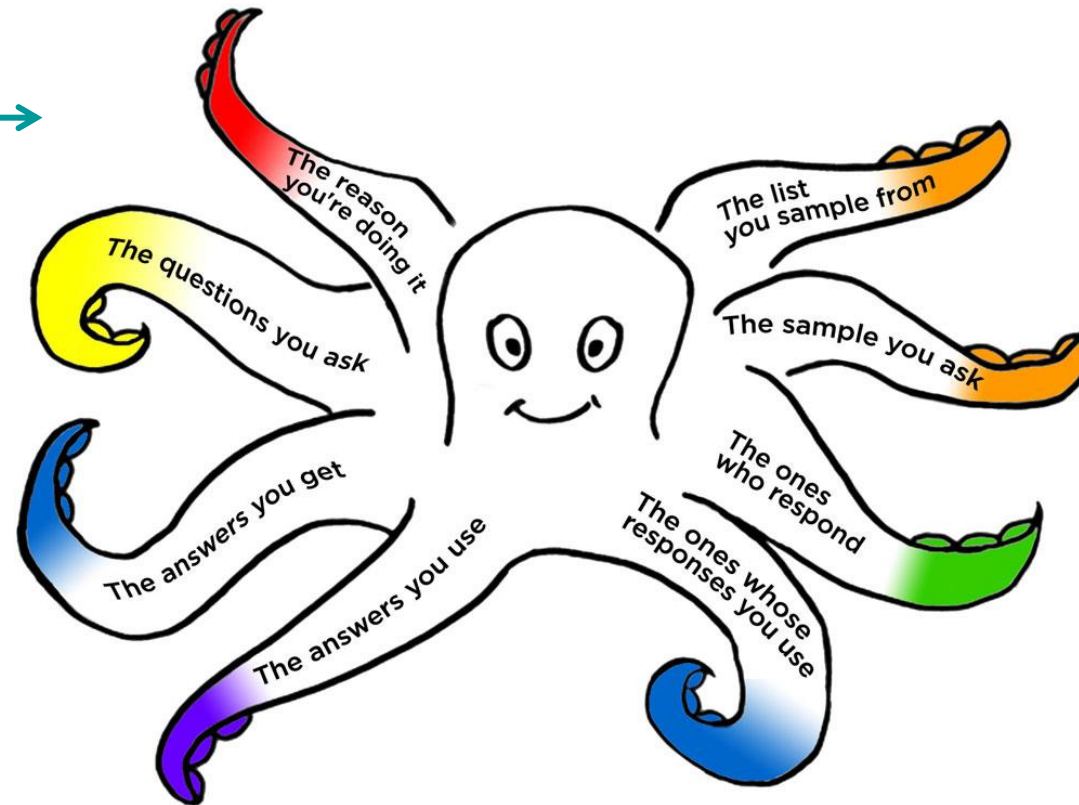


Here is my linear process for a survey

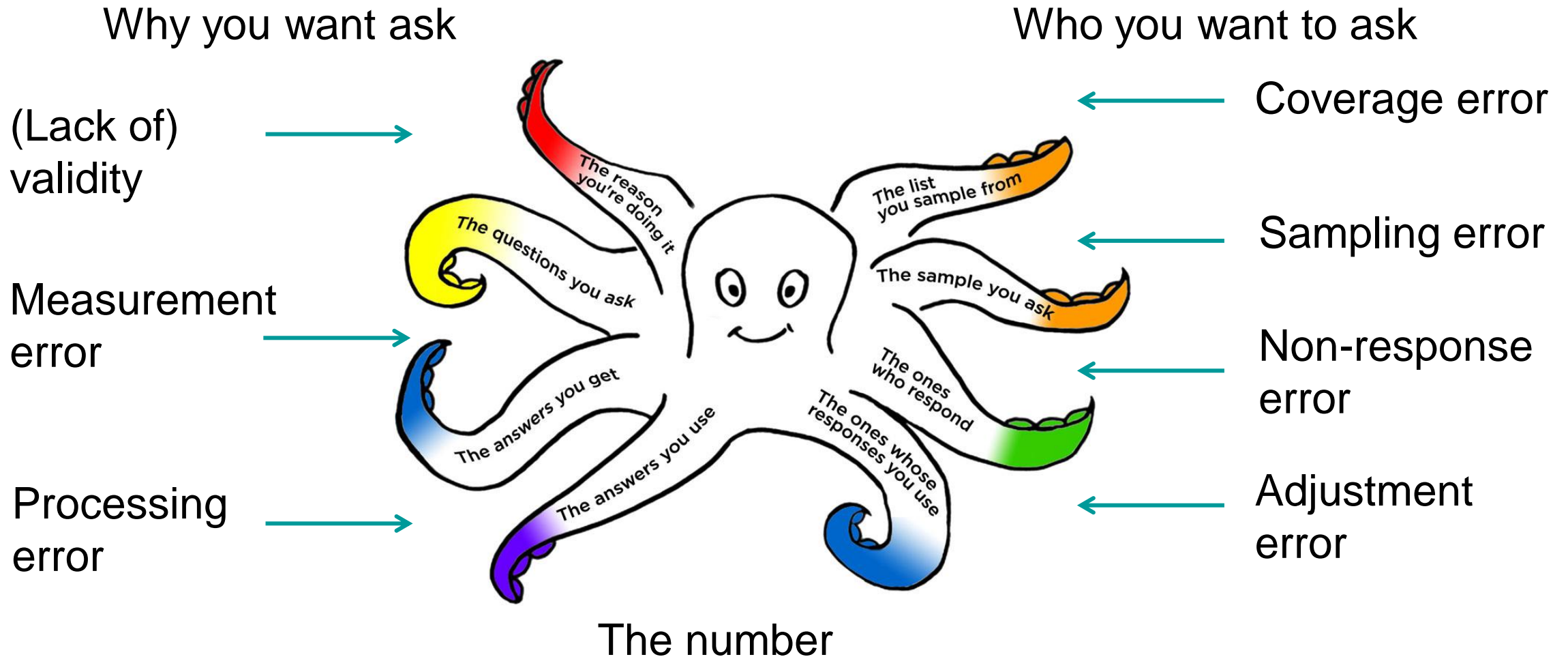


The questions must align with the reasons

(Lack of)
validity



There are errors all around the Survey Octopus



Write questions that make sense

Some questions are distracting

Did you experience any problems during your stay?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you identify any staff members that demonstrated exemplary service?

☐ Yes ☐ No

How would you rate your overall experience?

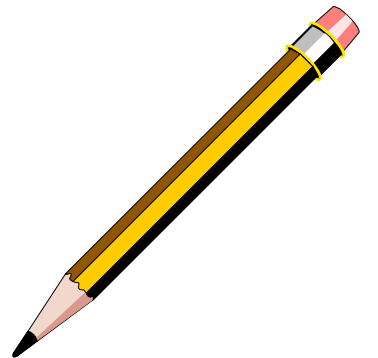
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Let's try it: create a better wording

- Original question:

“Did you identify any staff members that demonstrated exemplary service?”

- The challenge: Improve the wording of this question



Other questions use obscure phrases

Were you made aware of our Make It Right service commitment during your stay?

☐ Yes

☒ No

“Make it right service commitment” – 5 word noun string

I too wondered about
the meaning of
“improving violence
against women”



charcharsaysRAWR
@charcharsayrawr



Replying to @SamHersh01 and @OttawaPolice

Also what does "improving violence against women" mean?

Improving Violence Against Women

☐ 1 Very Good

☐ 2 Good

☐ 3 Average

☐ 4 Poor

☒ 5 Very Poor

☐ I don't know

Takeaway

Good questions use familiar words in familiar ways

Likert told us to avoid double-barrelled statements

2. The second criterion is the necessity of stating each proposition in *clear, concise, straight-forward statements*. Each statement should be in the simplest possible vocabulary. No statement should involve double negatives or other wording which will make it involved and confusing. Double-barreled statements are most confusing and should always be broken in two. Often an individual wishes to react favorably to one part and unfavorably to the other and when the parts are together he is at a loss to know how to react. Thus in the fol-

I've seen some many-barrelled questions

How easy or difficult was it to do what you wanted to do?

IMPORTANT: Please read the options carefully first before you select your response.

	Extremely easy	Quite easy	Neither difficult nor easy	Quite difficult	Extremely difficult
Thinking about when you set-up, amended or cancelled a payment (direct debit or standing order)	5	4	3	2	1
Thinking about when you viewed or downloaded your current account balance or statement	5	4	3	2	1
Thinking about when you made a payment or transferred money in or out of your current account	5	4	3	2	1

Takeaway

Good questions keep to one topic at a time

Questions like this appear quite often in UK market research

Please indicate to which occupational group the Chief Income Earner in your household belongs, or which group fits best.

This could be you: the Chief Income Earner is the person in your household with the largest income.

If the Chief Income Earner is retired and has an occupational pension please answer for their most recent occupation.

If the Chief Income Earner is not in paid employment but has been out of work for less than 6 months, please answer for their most recent occupation.

- ☐ Semi or unskilled manual work
(e.g. Manual workers, all apprentices to be skilled trades, Caretaker, Park keeper, non-HGV driver, shop assistant)
- ☐ Skilled manual worker
(e.g. Skilled Bricklayer, Carpenter, Plumber, Painter, Bus/ Ambulance Driver, HGV driver, AA patrolman, pub/bar worker, etc)
- ☐ Supervisory or clerical/ junior managerial/ professional/ administrative
(e.g. Office worker, Student Doctor, Foreman with 25+ employees, salesperson, etc)
- ☐ Intermediate managerial/ professional/ administrative
(e.g. Newly qualified (under 3 years) doctor, Solicitor, Board director small organisation, middle manager in large organisation, principal officer in civil service/local government)
- ☐ Higher managerial/ professional/ administrative
(e.g. Established doctor, Solicitor, Board Director in a large organisation (200+ employees, top level civil servant/public service employee))
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Casual worker - not in permanent employment
- ☐ Housewife/ Homemaker
- ☐ Retired and living on state pension
- ☐ Unemployed or not working due to long-term sickness
- ☐ Full-time carer of other household member
- ☐ Other

Last week,
several people
told me that this
does not make
sense to them

Please indicate to which occupational group the Chief Income Earner in your household belongs, or which group fits best.

This could be you: the Chief Income Earner is the person in your household with the largest income.

If the Chief Income Earner has an occupational pension please answer for their most recent occupation.

If the Chief Income Earner is not currently employed but has been out of work for less than 6 months, please answer for their most recent occupation.

Please indicate to which occupational group
the Chief Income Earner in your household
belongs, or which group fits best.

Takeaway

Good questions avoid
complex sentence structures

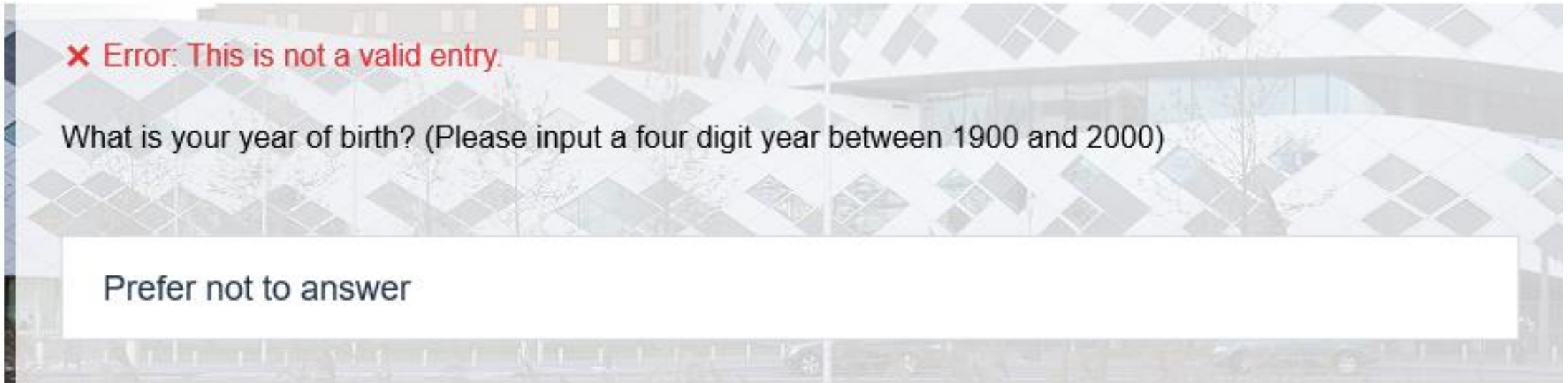
Write questions that people can answer

Answering questions makes us reveal things



What is your year of birth? (Please input a four digit year between 1900 and 2000)

But this error message didn't work for me



✖ Error: This is not a valid entry.

What is your year of birth? (Please input a four digit year between 1900 and 2000)

Prefer not to answer

The image shows a screenshot of a web form. At the top, there is a red error message: '✖ Error: This is not a valid entry.' Below this, the question 'What is your year of birth? (Please input a four digit year between 1900 and 2000)' is displayed. Underneath the question is a white text input field containing the text 'Prefer not to answer'. The background of the form is a blurred image of a modern building with a glass facade.

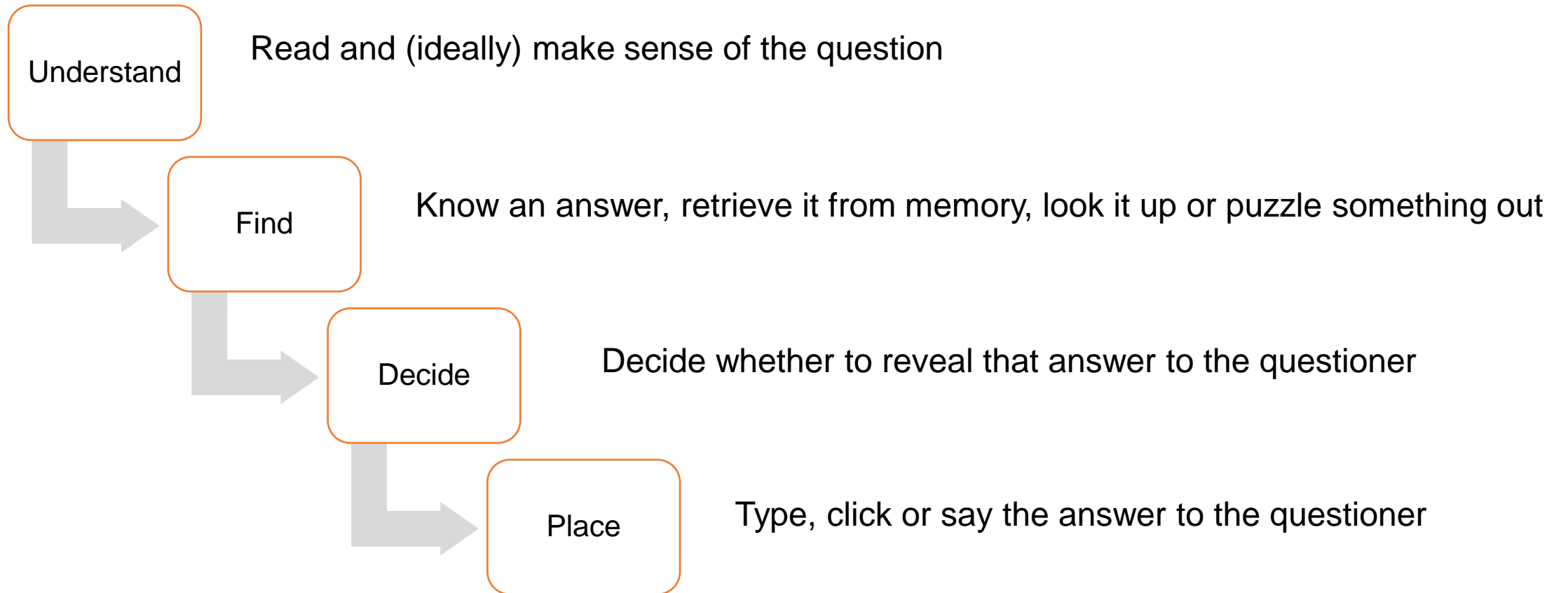
Takeaway

“Giving people
an option to refuse
is kinder”

Dr. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaaq

@Canaltch, <https://www.itchuaqiyaaq.com/>

There are four steps to answer a question



Where do you currently live?

Please make a selection on the map.

Let's try it:

Where would you “make
a selection on the map”?



A well-written question helps here but isn't quite enough

[illegible]

Do usability testing on your questionnaire

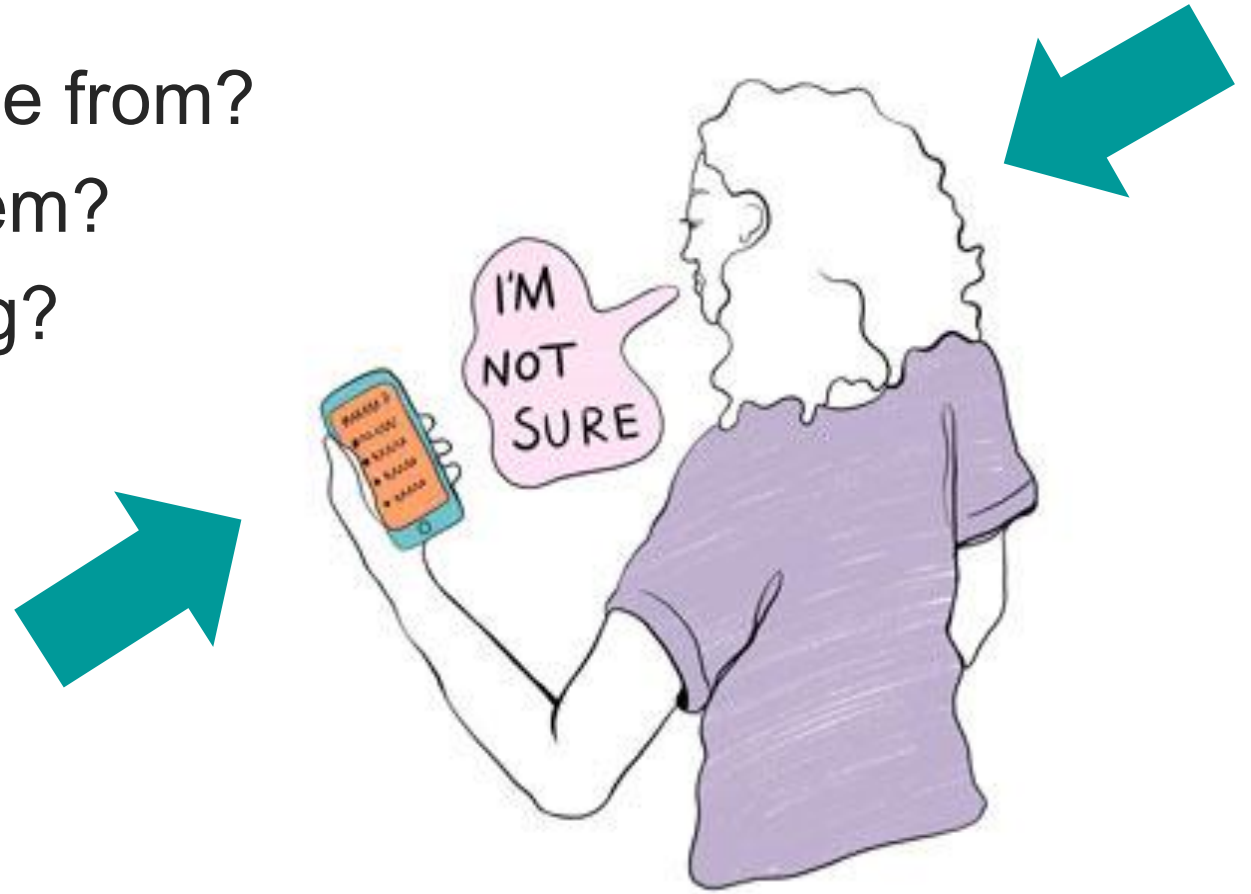
Get someone to answer your questionnaire while you watch



Do cognitive interviewing on your questions

Where did 'I'm not sure' come from?

- Was it an interaction problem?
- What is this person thinking?



Rate your satisfaction

I see a lot of questions
like this one

Section 2: The application process

Q4 How satisfied are you with the application process, on a scale from 0 to 10 where '0' means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 10

Likert had three formats in his scales

1. Do you favor the early entrance of the United States into the League of Nations?

YES	?	NO
(4)	(3)	(2)

13. How much military training should we have?

- | | |
|--|-----|
| (a) We need universal compulsory military training. | (1) |
| (b) We need Citizens Military Training Camps and Reserve Officers Training Corps, but not universal military training. | (2) |
| (c) We need some facilities for training reserve officers but not as much as at present. | (3) |
| (d) We need only such military training as is required to maintain our regular army. | (4) |
| (e) All military training should be abolished. | (5) |

17. The United States, whether a member or not, should co-operate fully in the humanitarian and economic programs of the League of Nations.

Strongly Approve	Approve	Undecided	Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove
(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)

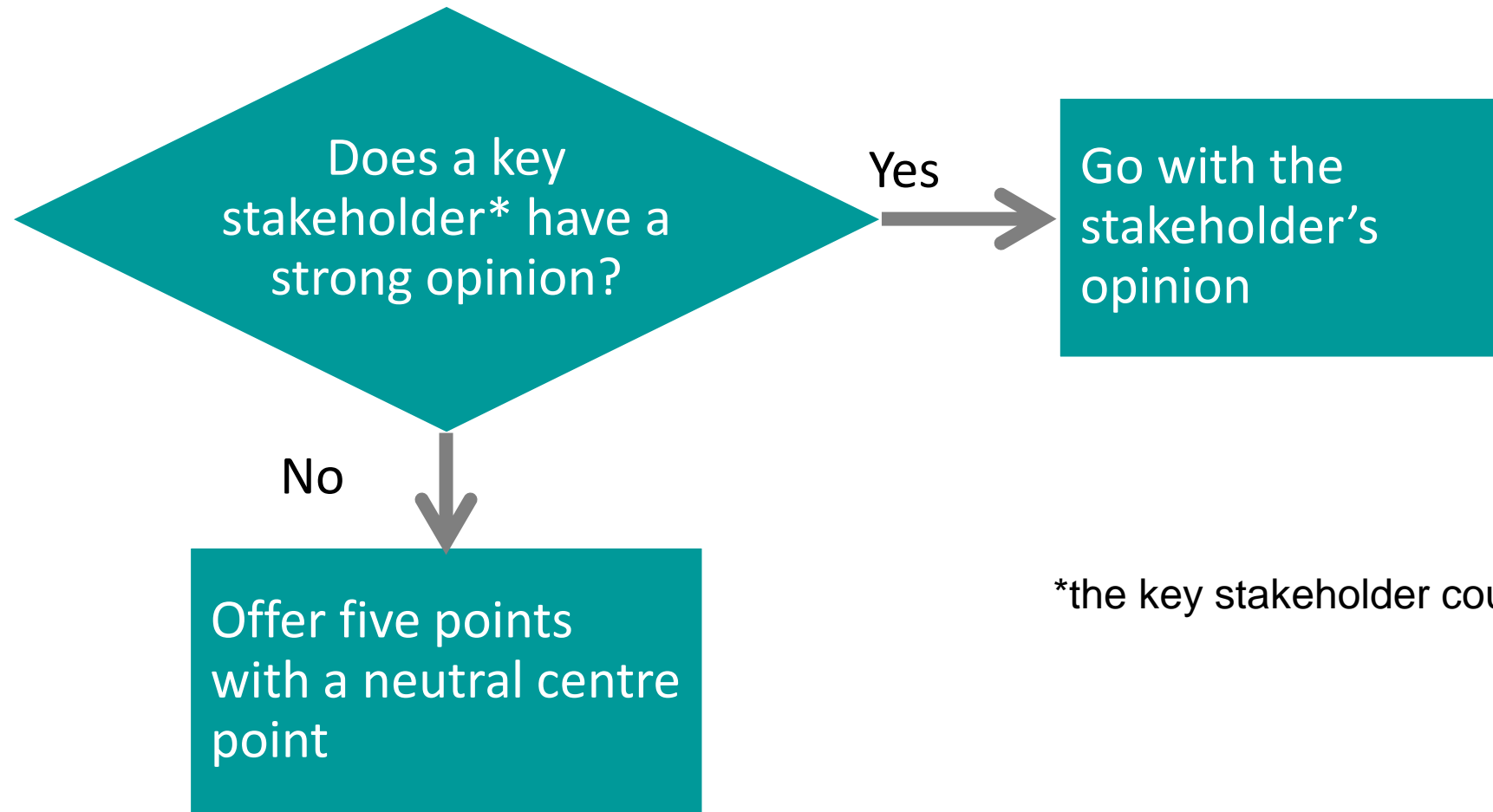
You can find an academic paper to support almost any number of response points

- Krosnick and Presser refer to about 87 papers on response points

The collage displays several different survey question formats and response scales:

- Top Left:** A table with two rows of questions and seven response options: Completely satisfied, Very satisfied, Quite satisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Quite dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied, and Completely dissatisfied. The questions are "Your outward journey with easyJet" and "Your whole experience with easyJet on this latest occasion".
- Top Right:** A semantic differential scale with two statements: "I usually get what I want in life." and "I need to be kept informed about news events." The response options are True and False, with a visual anchor (a circle) indicating the position of the response.
- Middle Left:** A Likert scale with five response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly disagree. The question is "1. Is this OK? Tell us if you agree with us".
- Middle Right:** A semantic differential scale with two statements: "Overall, I was satisfied with my experience in Hayward Dining Room" and "Please tell us how your experience at John Lewis compares to each of the other retailers you have visited?". The response options are Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and Not Applicable. The question is "Overall, I was satisfied with my experience in Hayward Dining Room".
- Bottom Left:** A Likert scale with five response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly disagree. The question is "2. Tell us more about this".
- Bottom Right:** A visual anchor scale with four points: Very Unimportant, 2, 3, and Very Important. The question is "1: *Please rate how well the site is organized." and the response options are 1=Poor, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and Don't Know.

I have a flowchart to help you to decide



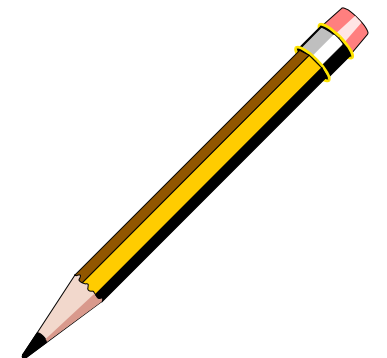
*the key stakeholder could be you

Is 'satisfaction' the only relevant emotion?

Section 2: The application process

Q4 How satisfied are you with the application process, on a scale from 0 to 10 where '0' means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'?

Let's try a thought-experiment



Satisfaction is a complex matter

Compared experience to what?	Resulting thoughts
(nothing)	Indifference
Expectations	Better / worse / different
Needs	Met / not met / mixture
Excellence (the ideal product)	Good / poor quality (or 'good enough')
Fairness	Treated equitably / inequitably
Events that might have been	Vindication / regret

Consider other emotions and reactions

The Microsoft Product Reaction Cards have 118 adjectives

Accessible	Creative	Fast	Meaningful	Slow
Advanced	Customizable	Flexible	Motivating	Sophisticated
Annoying	Cutting edge	Fragile	Not Secure	Stable
Appealing	Dated	Fresh	Not Valuable	Sterile

I also see a lot of “recommend” questions

Would you recommend us to
a friend or family member?

“Recommend to friend/family” can be OK

A shop selling clothes

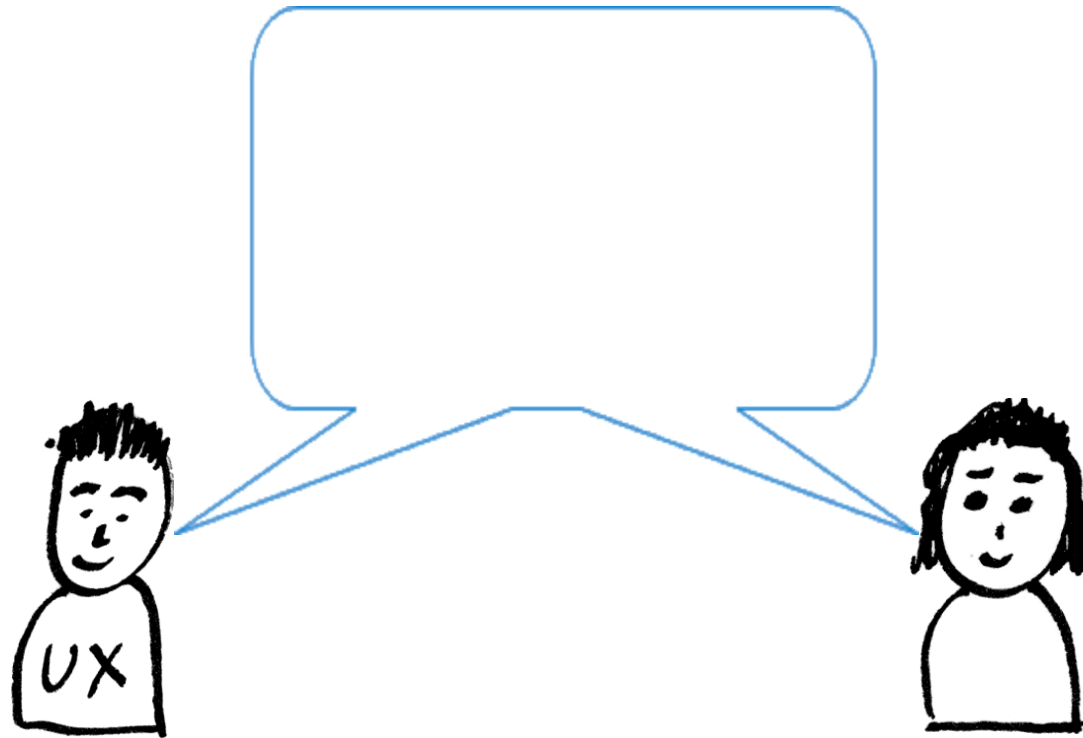
What do you want to know?	Whether they will recommend
Why do you want to know?	To compare numbers over time
What number do you need to make a decision?	Some good reasons (investigate and fix problems) Some bad ones (punish staff)

“Recommend to friend/family” can be OK

	A shop selling clothes	A hospital ward
What do you want to know?	Whether they will recommend	????
Why do you want to know?	To compare numbers over time	Because someone said they had to ask
What number do you need to make a decision?	Some good reasons (investigate and fix problems) Some bad ones (punish staff)	???? What decision?

Takeaway

Test your questions by
interviewing in context

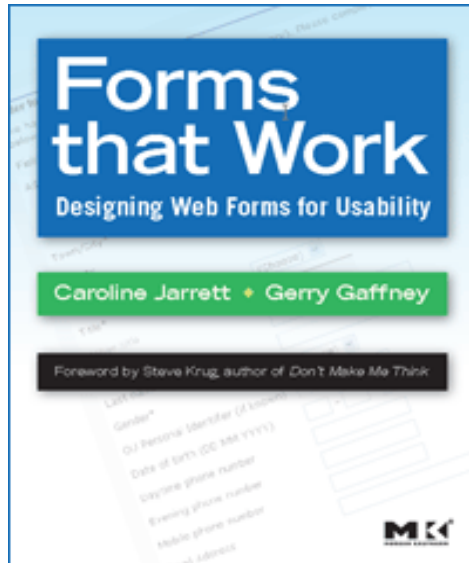


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SURVEYS THAT WORK

A Practical Guide for Designing Better Surveys

by **CAROLINE JARRETT**

Foreword by Steve Krug

 Rosenfeld