



3 conversation tactics that will help improve your surveys

Easy-to-follow best practices for communicating with
respondents like human beings

A good survey is like a good conversation.

It should be effortless and fun, not ponderous and frustrating. Even if you can't see your respondents, you want to be concise and interesting—not boring, demanding, or creepy.

Not everyone can be a good conversationalist, but anyone can learn to be a good survey writer. All you have to do is apply these three conversation tactics:

- Let the conversation flow naturally
- Avoid unnecessary interruptions
- Don't demand too much

Let the conversation flow naturally

When you strike up a conversation with someone, you don't normally start by asking how much they weigh or what their most tragic childhood memory is. That would be weird. **You've got to build rapport and warm the person up to answering your questions.** Similarly, you don't want to start a survey with your most sensitive or difficult questions.

Start out with the easy ones. Start by asking for your respondents' job titles, not how much money they make. Don't begin by asking them to fill out a long open-ended question; start with a simple multiple choice or rating scale question.

Begin with questions related to your survey's topic.

You don't want people to get the wrong idea. Did they click into the wrong survey? It's a good idea to give people an idea of what type of survey they're going to be taking early on. It's not always practical to make your first question related to your survey. No big deal—just make sure your second or third question is.

Start general, then get specific. There's a reason why [customer satisfaction surveys](#) often start with NPS® questions or why [event feedback surveys](#) ask you to rate your experience overall. It may seem like common sense, but you should always start with more broad, general questions. They sets the context for the rest of your survey and lets your respondents think about your survey topic as a whole before focusing on specific details.

Keep related questions together. It's important to remember that you're almost certainly much more familiar with your survey topic than your respondent is. Connections between disparate ideas in your survey might be obvious to you, but it could be confusing to your respondents if you jump from topic to topic too much. Keep the flow of your survey easy to follow and natural by keeping related thoughts together.

Check out our free survey templates

Our survey pros design and review our free library of survey templates to ensure they flow effortlessly.

[See templates →](#)

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Avoid unnecessary interruptions

Natural breaks in a conversation are actually a good thing, but nothing is worse than constant interruptions in a conversation.

You can think of page breaks as natural breaks in a conversation. **What's the right amount of breaks to put into a survey? It depends on the context.** Let's look at the benefits and drawbacks of page breaks.

Benefits: Page breaks are good for breaking up long-scrolling surveys or surveys that touch on several different topics. They're also necessary if you plan on using any kind of [skip logic](#), since you need other pages to skip to.

There's another benefit to using page breaks: **Every time a respondent goes to the next page, their responses are saved—even if they abandon the survey.**

In both examples featured here, the respondent completed only half of a 4-question survey and then dropped out. **Since the survey in example 1 has two pages, it still salvages half the data. The survey with just one page doesn't yield any.**

Example 1:
with page break

Customer Service Template

1. Overall, how would you rate the quality of your customer service experience?

Very positive
 Somewhat positive
 Neutral
 Somewhat negative
 Very negative

2. How well did we understand your questions and concerns?

Extremely well
 Very well
 Somewhat well
 Not so well
 Not at all well

NEXT

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Customer Service Template

3. How likely is it that you would recommend this company to a friend or colleague?

Not at all likely Extremely likely

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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4. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

DONE

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Example 2:
without page break

Customer Service Template

1. Overall, how would you rate the quality of your customer service experience?

Very positive
 Somewhat positive
 Neutral
 Somewhat negative
 Very negative

2. How well did we understand your questions and concerns?

Extremely well
 Very well
 Somewhat well
 Not so well
 Not at all well

3. How likely is it that you would recommend this company to a friend or colleague?

Not at all likely Extremely likely

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

4. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

DONE

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Drawbacks: One of the main concerns with including multiple pages in your survey has to do with how your survey appears on mobile devices.

While it might seem that presenting questions one at a time would make for a good mobile experience, if a respondent is asked to click the next button to get to the next page in the survey multiple times then they might get frustrated.

Furthermore, internet connectivity is generally somewhat less reliable on mobile devices than it is on desktops, which could affect whether or not your survey loads the next page.

Bottom line, you should...

Include all your questions on one page if:

- You've got a short survey.
- You expect most people to take it on a mobile device.

Include page breaks if:

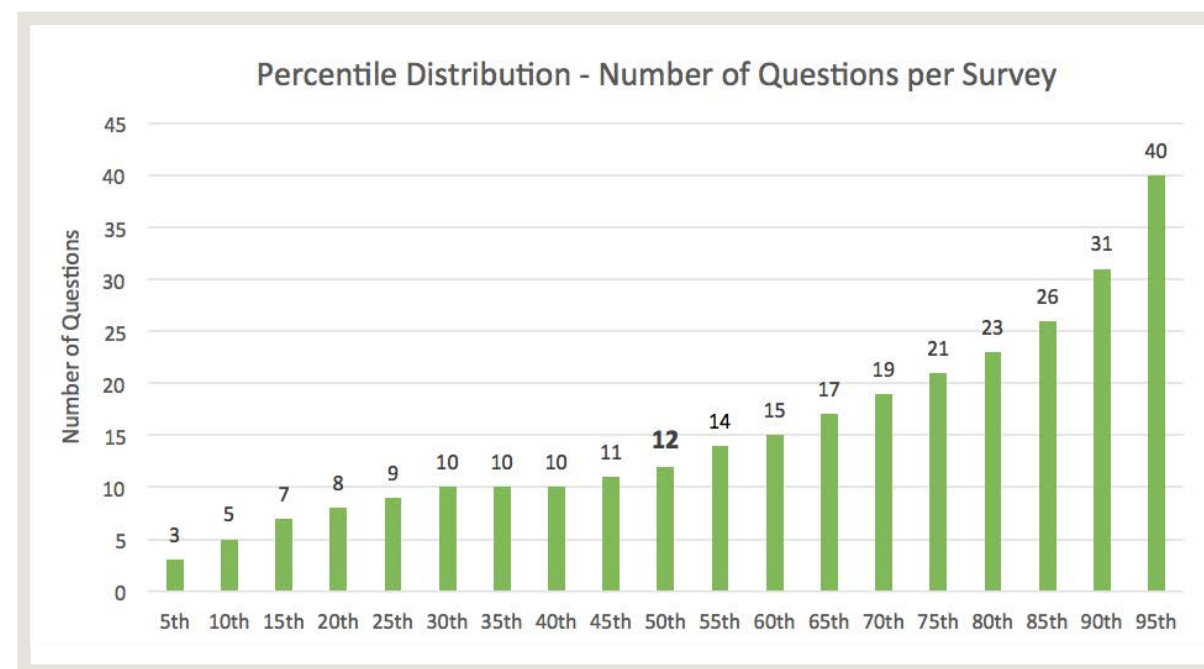
- You've got a long survey or a survey with multiple subjects.
- Your survey contains [skip logic](#), [question randomization](#) or [question and answer piping](#).
- You're worried people will start your survey but won't complete it. But if you're truly worried people won't complete it, it's important to take this next lesson to heart.

Don't demand too much

Just like in conversations, you don't want your survey to be a bore. Remember, rarely does anyone *have* to take your survey. They take it because they *want* to share their opinion. Whether they're providing feedback or giving kudos, these people are doing you a favor by taking your survey. Treat them that way.

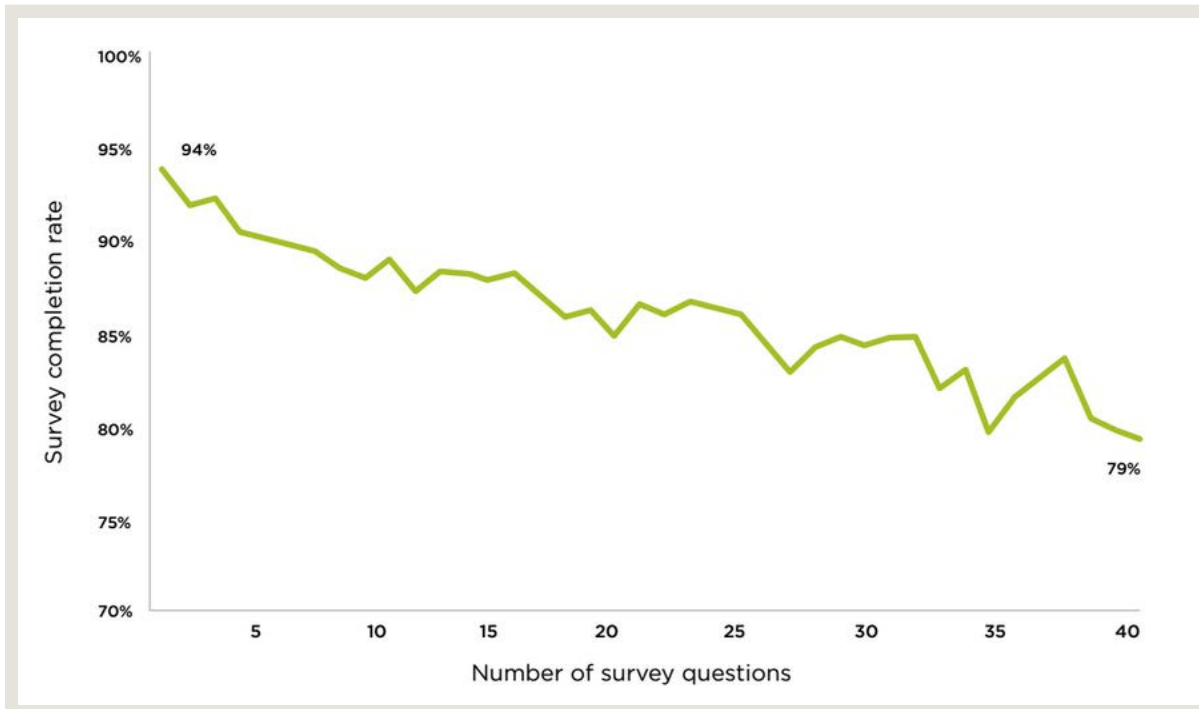
Keep your survey concise. When it comes to writing survey questions, be succinct and don't ask unnecessary questions. Remember that it's better to have a little good data than a lot of bad data, and respondents spend more time thinking about their answers if your survey is shorter. However, there are certain situations where a survey should be long.

For surveys targeted at a general audience, the data is pretty clear. Take a look at this survey data aggregated from 26,000 surveys sent on SurveyMonkey Audience.



This chart groups the data into percentiles, showing that half of surveys (the 50th percentile) had 12 questions or fewer. Ninety-seven percent of them had three questions or more and only 5% had more 40 questions or more. **You can use this data to guide how many question you put into your own survey. Some surveys will need to be longer than average, but it's generally a good idea to keep your surveys concise.**

Why? After analyzing the millions of surveys run on SurveyMonkey, we see a direct correlation: **The longer the survey, the lower the completion rate.** Take a look at this graph tracking survey completion rate in relation to survey length on the next page.



The completion rate drops from 94% on a typical 1-question survey to 79% on a 40-question survey. That might not seem so bad, but it's important to keep a few things in mind when looking at these results:

- This tracks the number of people who started a survey and didn't complete it, not the number of people who received a link to a survey and didn't complete it. So if you sent a 40-question survey to 100 people, you would probably get back a lot fewer than 79 responses.
- Your mileage may vary. The average 40-question survey in this study gets 79% completion rate, not all of them.
- Only getting 79% of your responses is actually a pretty big deal, especially if you're sampling a small population. The lower the completion rate, the higher your chance is for nonresponse bias, which can seriously affect the quality of your data.

What's nonresponse bias?

When the people who respond to your survey aren't representative—meaning that they have different opinions or characteristics—of the people who don't respond. That means you're talking to the wrong people, which can give you bad data.

While there is plenty of reason to take great care when considering survey length, there are a few things that can change everything.

Be mindful about your question types. Some question types are much more taxing to answer than others. Multiple choice questions are typically the least difficult to answer, while open-ended questions and matrix questions require more work.

It's simply more difficult to think of your own response and type it out than it is to select a response from a list of answer options. In the same way, scrolling up, down, left, and right to respond to a large matrix of questions can be frustrating—especially on mobile.

A 12-question survey with only open-ended responses is asking a lot, while a 25-question survey with only multiple choice questions probably isn't so bad.

Put yourself in your respondents' shoes. If it's not a survey you'd want to take, chances are your respondents won't either.

If you annoy your respondents, they may not answer as carefully as you'd like—even if they complete your survey. That can actually be worse than having a lot of dropouts because you may not be able to tell if your data is good or bad!

Consider your audience. Everyone's a nerd about something. Some people can talk about car repair forever and never get bored. Other people will want to change the subject immediately.

The same idea works in surveys. **If you send a survey to an audience that has a vested interest in the subject, then it's more feasible to send them longer, more difficult surveys.** But if you're sending your survey to a general audience, you should keep it short and sweet.

Don't require your respondents to answer all your questions. It's tempting to require respondents to answer your survey questions so that you don't miss any data from your respondents. But once again, think of your survey like a conversation.

How would you feel if someone demanded you answer a question you didn't want to answer? Annoyed? Completely exasperated? There's a fair amount of evidence to suggest survey respondents react in a similar way.

Take a look at this 2015 study that focused on forced answers to online surveys.

The study: [The authors created a survey](#) that covered highly sensitive or personal topics (difficult to answer) and made the questions required for some respondents and not for others.

The results: Thirty-five percent of the respondents who tried to skip questions, but weren't allowed to, dropped out of the survey. Only 9% of the respondents who weren't told they were required to answer the questions dropped out of the survey.

Context is important here: The study used highly personal and sensitive questions and its audience wasn't highly invested in the topic. If you're sending your survey to a group that's highly invested in a topic, your dropout rates may be better. That includes panelists, like in SurveyMonkey audience panels, who have motivation to finish your surveys.

Need people to take your survey?

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Is there any middle ground? Actually, yes.

You can add “Don't know,” “Prefer not to answer”, or “Other (Please specify)” answer options. These are especially useful on especially sensitive questions. They allow your respondents a way out of answering without abandoning your survey. Even better, it's actually a good way to ensure you're getting truthful responses and good data.

There was another important part to the study: The authors included a third group who were given required questions, but also let respondents choose “Prefer not to answer” or “I don't know.” At the end of the survey, they asked respondents how truthfully they had answered.

The results: Thirteen percent of the group that was given “Prefer not to answer”-type options said they hadn't responded truthfully to all the questions. In the other two groups, the results were much worse. Twenty-two percent of the group that didn't require answers said they hadn't responded truthfully, while 25% of the group with required answers did.

Conclusion

Practically everything mentioned in this guide adheres to the same idea: **Don't treat a conversation with your respondents any differently than you would treat a conversation in real life.** Being polite, engaging, and accommodating isn't just going to make your respondents enjoy their experience more—it's going to get you better data.

Remember:

Let the conversation flow naturally. Don't ask too much, too soon. And make sure your conversation flows in a logical direction.

Don't make too many interruptions. Page breaks are good. Too many are bad. Make sure you're mindful of how you place them.

Don't demand too much. Long, difficult surveys with lots of required questions should be reserved for special audiences. Send them to people who have vested interest in the topic or people who have extra motivation to take your survey, like SurveyMonkey Audience panelists.

Try applying these tactics to your next survey

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

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