

How can I be sure my data collection instruments will collect the information my project needs?

What's in a question? Well, as it turns out, quite a lot! When it comes to developing questions for your data collection instruments, there can be more to it than just brainstorming or pulling out old data collection instruments from your files or those of other projects.

First, do a little end-use strategizing, or thinking about how the data you plan to collect will be used by your project. Start by asking: who is the data meant to inform or persuade? Then identify what specific pieces of information you need in order to inform or persuade your target audience. TCEC has developed a [checklist of questions](#) that can help you work through the process of designing an instrument that will actually collect the data you need.

Once you've identified the chunks of data you're seeking, from there you can develop questions to capture the info. At that point, it may make sense to see if the instruments your project used in the past will still meet the need. Or you may want to see how other projects have framed the issue by looking at examples of their surveys, observation forms or key informant interview guides. To get your hands on a selection of data collection instruments on any objective, contact TCEC. Evaluation associates there can search their repository of instruments compiled from projects throughout the state.



TCEC's got a second set of eyes to look at your draft

After you've developed a draft of your own data collection instrument, it can be a good idea to have an evaluation associate look it over and provide advice on how it might be improved. Whether you are well versed in evaluation or new to it, it's useful to have a second set of eyes review what you've come up with in order to catch what might seem clear to you but ambiguous to other populations.

The next step in the development process is to pilot test the data collection instrument on a few individuals in your population of interest (people like those you plan to target in data collection but who are not in your sample). Try out the survey or question guide and explore:

- Whether the questions flow off the tongue easily
- If they are understood by participants in the same manner as intended
- Whether everyone in the population of interest understands them in the same way
- Where further clarification is needed in order for people to understand what is being asked
- If you are getting answers you did not expect (this might indicate that the question is being understood differently than intended)

Once the pilot test is complete, the next step would be to revise the instrument one last time and then train data collectors carefully on how to implement it. After that, you're on your way to getting the data your project needs!

Photo by Julie Elmen