

An updated version of this Guidance is expected in Fall 2022 and will provide more detailed discussion of ethical issues in online survey research.

Using Online Surveys for Research

Online surveys may appear to simplify data collection but they are not without ethical challenges. Considerations of informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw apply equally to online surveys. They may also introduce misunderstandings that could be resolved during an in-person interview or questionnaire. Additionally, the use of an online platform may create barriers to participation for people who struggle with or do not have access to technology.

The UBC Behavioural REBs recommend that UBC researchers make use of UBC survey tools, which incorporate best practices in data security.

- Qualtrics <https://it.ubc.ca/services/teaching-learning-tools/survey-tool>
- REDCap <https://redcap.ubc.ca/>

If you choose not to use a UBC tool, you should justify your decision in your application and be very clear whether you are collecting and retaining personal information. For further information on personal information see: [Privacy Fact Sheet: What is Personal Information?](#) If you are collecting personal information, participants should be made aware of what platform you are using and how information will be protected, so they can make an informed decision about participating.

Participant Consent for Online Surveys

If participants will only be asked to complete an online survey, a cover letter may be used instead of a full consent form that requires their signature, provided that the cover letter includes the information needed by the participant to make an informed decision about participating in the survey study. If you are using this method of obtaining consent, include the following or similar wording: “By submitting the completed questionnaire/survey, you are consenting to participate in this research.” In most cases, the cover letter/consent will need to include:

- UBC letterhead, when possible
- The study title (from Box 1.7)
- Principal investigator’s name and contact information (graduate students should be identified as co-investigators)
- The primary contact (in case participants have questions about the study)
- Short study description
- Risks and benefits for participants
- Any limitations on confidentiality
- A statement that participation is optional
- A statement, if applicable, that remuneration will be dependent on attention checks
- Whether withdrawal of data is possible
- Ethics ID number (where it is visible to recipients)
- UBC Research Participant Complaint Line text¹

If you are unable to include any of the above elements in the cover letter because of the

¹ The required Complaint Line text is: “If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.”

study design, ensure that the omissions are clearly described and justified in your application, e.g. in Box 6.6/K.6 Obtaining Consent.

Tips for Survey-Only Applications

The BREB has a specialized, shortened ethics application form for survey research; you may submit your application using this form – IF your study is minimal risk AND surveys are the only research method being used. If you are conducting both surveys and interviews or using other research methods, the short survey application form cannot be used. The shortened form is built into the RISE application, which will truncate when the applicant indicates that a survey-only study is being submitted for review (question 4.9). The following are provisos or changes commonly requested on survey applications:

1. The study purpose needs to be clearly described in Box K.1.
2. If you are collecting identifiable information for the purposes of a draw, your response to question K.4.A should be “Yes.”
3. If you are conducting a draw, Box K.7 and the consent form should specify that participants are eligible for the draw even if they choose to withdraw from the study.
4. Clearly indicate that all files that contain identifiable information will be password protected and encrypted.
5. The study title you enter in Box 1.7 will need to match the title provided in the consent form/cover letter.
6. If you state that data are collected anonymously, they cannot be withdrawn once submitted. Ensure that you are consistent when explaining this in the ethics application and consent form.
7. The survey must be uploaded to the RISE application as it will be viewed by participants. All measures being used must be included for review.

For more information about using the Short survey-only ethics application, please see: https://ethics.research.ubc.ca/sites/ore.ubc.ca/files/documents/Behavioural_short-form.pdf.