



Web-Based Survey Guidelines for Adults

Adopted by the Institutional Review Board on 2/23/05

Web-based research is relatively recent and IRBs are still in the process of developing policies and procedures to manage these new tools. The information below had been developed by NJIT's IRB to serve as a guide to principal investigators to address problems with informed consent and confidentiality for web-based research of adults.

Informed Consent

1. Participants must demonstrate informed consent prior to participating in survey research. Participants must be able to easily print readable copies of the consent statements for their records. For web-based surveys, consent can be obtained using several methods. The most common method is to request that the participant perform a specific action in order to participate in a survey. We recommend the following method that will ask your participants to click on a button if they consent to participate:
 - a. Use the Model Consent Form developed by the IRB - At the end of your Informed Consent text, include a statements, please click on the "Continue" button below to indicate your consent to participate in this study."
 - b. Your Informed Consent Page should be separate from the rest of your study. Thus, by performing the specific action of clicking on the "Continue" or "I Consent" buttons, your participants clearly indicate that they have fully read the information about the study and are providing their informed consent prior to viewing or completing any questions in your study.

Other Options:

- c. Ask for a specific piece of information – You can request that participants enter a valid e-mail address (or other specific information) prior to participating in lieu of their signatures. Simply insert a required question immediately after your informed consent text.
 - d. If a signed paper informed consent statement is required from each participant, then we recommend the following: Immediately after your informed consent statement, enter your instructions to the participants (e.g., please enter your information, print this page using the link below, sign on the line below, and mail to the following address).
2. Your consent form must include a statement that only those 18 years and above are permitted to participate.
3. All consent forms must inform the subject that there is no complete secure interaction online (i.e., “As an online participant in this research, there is always the risk of intrusion by outside agents (i.e., hacking) and, therefore the possibility of being identified exists).
4. All consent forms must state whether screen or actual names will appear in written reports.
5. Consent forms should inform participants whether experiment is being run from a “secure” https server of the kind typically used to handle credit card transactions or a http server with greater risk for hacking.

Survey Completion Risks

1. Risks during the actual completion of survey questions are only slightly different than with traditional methods. Participants are likely to have more privacy at their computer than in a lecture hall or classroom.

2. You should address concerns regarding the potential for viewing survey data by a third party as follows:

- a. All survey pages are constructed such that a completed survey cannot be viewed by simply pressing the “Back” button (thus greatly reducing the chance that someone could “back up” to see previously entered data).
- b. All survey pages should be entirely dynamic and database-generated (instead of static web pages that could be stored by the participant's computer). In addition, upon completion of the survey, the survey window itself should automatically close and disappear eliminating temporary history files associated with that survey.

Identifying Information

1. For a variety of reasons, many researchers need to collect identifying information about their participants. NJIT’s IRB is rightfully concerned that such information should be handled separately from research data. Identifying information about participants and research data should be collected, stored, and accessed separately.
2. Participants who complete surveys should be automatically assigned an internal number called the Respondent ID Number. Researchers can use this data to link identifying information with participants – though such data should be stored separately.

IP Addresses

1. An IP address is a unique identifying number used to identify computers connected to the Internet. An IP address might be static (i.e., always refer to one institution's server), dynamic (assigned upon connection), or pooled (a group of servers share one or more IP addresses). IP addresses may also change multiple times during the same connection - for example, the IP address of AOL users may change multiple times per minute. An IP address generally will represent either an institution (i.e. a university or large company) or an Internet Service Provider (i.e. AOL or an ISP serving one or more communities).

2. Benefits and Risks of Collecting IP Addresses - For some researchers, IP addresses can be useful (in conjunction with the date/time stamp) for filtering out duplicate entries, getting a sense of the geographic nature of your participants, and a variety of other reasons. Thus, collecting IP addresses may have some benefit. On the other hand, IP addresses represent a form of potentially indirect identifying information about a participant. (Rarely, if ever, is an IP address associated with only one individual user.) Keep in mind that an IP address is less of a threat to confidentiality than handwriting, fingerprints, postal-addresses, email addresses, handwritten signatures, or being observed completing a paper survey. However, the potential risk to confidentiality of collecting IP addresses must be considered.