The TLT Group

Teaching, Learning, and Technology

A Non-Profit Corporation

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Tip Sheet for Users of Flashlight Online

These hints respond to the problems that most often frustrate users (especially new users) of Flashlight Online. Print these pages and keep them beside your computer the first few times you use Flashlight Online. And please send problems we've missed, or suggestions for clarifying these answers, to Ehrmann@tltgroup.org --- Thanks!!

I. First Steps in Using Flashlight Online

- Get your own Flashlight Online account (username and password) from your institution's Flashlight Online administrator. Having a unique username protects your privacy and the privacy of your data; Flashlight Online is shared by authors at over 100 institutions around the world. [This Flashlight Online username and password will be different from the TLT username and password shared by everyone at your institution and used for subscriber-only pages on the www.tltgroup.org web site.]
- The Flashlight Online system is available at http://flashlightonline.wsu.edu. Click the button near the bottom of that page to go to the login page. Flashlight Online runs on CTLSilhouette software, created and maintained by Washington State University.
- Many of the features of Flashlight Online (e.g., the item bank of almost 500 validated questions) are invisible until you start creating a survey by using the "new survey" button.
- If you are a new user exploring the system and looking for studies done by others, your options are limited. Users can only see surveys done by others in their groups (with exception described below) and ordinary can't see data collected by others; this is part of the privacy protection that is part of Flashlight Online.
- **Help** and **Handbook:** An extensive set of help screens are available if you click the help button on the top row of icons near the right. That's also where you can find an e-mail form to send questions, ideas, and complaints to the administrators of the Flashlight Online system. The *Flashlight Evaluation Handbook* is also available when you're creating a survey; its icon is in that same row, toward the left hand side of the screen.

II. Creating a Survey

- After you log-in and select your (member) group, the screen says "Pick a Survey." Despite the label, this screen is indeed also the place to create a new survey. The button to create a new, blank survey is on top of the screen toward the left side.
- "**New survey**" creates a blank questionnaire (just as "new.." creates a blank word processing document or a blank spreadsheet). Don't confuse "New Survey" with "Start survey." The two buttons sound alike but have very different functions. (see "Start survey" below.)
- To add questions (also known as "items"), choose "**Add items**" from the second row of icons at the top or "**template**" from the top row of icons in order to put questions into your survey.
    - **"Add items"** lets you search almost 500 validated items (the "Current Student Inventory") or create your own (custom questions -- see below)

- **"Template"** lets you start a survey by using someone else's published survey or item bank as a draft. Templates should only be used when your survey is still empty: no introduction, no items. Choose "new Survey," fill in the initial screen with the survey's name etc., click OK so you see the blank survey itself, and then immediately click the Template button (top row of icons) in order to see available templates. To preview the contents of the template, click "View Template" to the right of its name. If you then want to copy the template's items into your blank survey, click the template's name (to the left of "View Template").
- **Copying an existing survey and then, if you like modifying it:** All surveys are stored in member groups. The person doing the copying needs to be a member of the group where the survey is stored. Use the "copy" command in the lower row (dark buttons) of icons at the top of the screen. If you then want to move the survey to a different group, you can do so by using the "move" button in that same row of icons. If the survey has been customized using html and if you would like to add items, click the "add items" button. This will remove all customization (including editing of the text); your survey will revert to the state that the original survey was in when its author began html customization.
- **The crucial "submit" and "OK" buttons:** As you write a survey, there are really two versions of your questions – the version that matters (on the CTLSilhouette computer at Washington State University) and the one you can alter (the version on your own machine.) The things you type on your machine do not become part of the real survey on Silhouette until you click the "submit" or "OK" button at the very bottom of the page you've been working on. It's easy to miss this button; it is often out of sight unless you scroll to the bottom of the page. Clicking it saves only what you've done on that particular page. ***If you go to a new page without first clicking the 'OK' or ' submit' button, you will lose the work you've done on that page!***

- **Print-friendly:** Want to see what the survey will look like to a respondent, or print it out so you can distribute it on paper? Click the "print friendly" button. Remember what we said immediately above: the version of the survey that matters is on the server, not on your screen. So when you click "print friendly" Silhouette sends to your screen a print-friendly version of your survey as it looked the last time you clicked "OK" or "Submit."
- **Custom questions (i.e., questions you create yourself)**: most authors will want to use their own language or ideas to craft some (perhaps all) items. That's the function of 'custom questions.' Novices experience three problems in using these questions: the "10-40 puzzle" and the "checkbox unchecked mistake."
  - **The 10-40 puzzle**: Flashlight Online creates custom questions in blocks of 10 (you can choose "10," "20," "30" or "40"). What if you only need one such question? Or thirteen? No problem. Unless you actually put words into the blank question and check the box beside it, it won't appear in your survey. So, for example, if you only need two custom questions, pick "10," just fill in two of them, and click the box beside each one.
  - **The checkbox unchecked mistake**: To repeat: when adding a question to your survey, you must click the box to the left of the item so that it has an X in it. The most common (and frustrating error) that novices make when creating a custom question is to write it, click "Submit" at the bottom of the page, and wonder why their questions have disappeared. If this has just happened to you, don't panic - you might be able to recover by clicking on the 'back' (left) arrow on your browser.
  - **The block format/open format quandary**: Flashlight Online gives you a choice of 8 types of question: five kinds of block format (i.e., a series of questions, all with the same answer options such as "strongly agree," "neutral," and "disagree") radio button (respondents can choose only one answer) questions, and three kinds of open format

(each question has a different answer structure than the next) questions. You can pick one of the eight. Some people look at the menu and try, for example, in constructing a radio button question to choose “radio button” from the bottom group and “five answers” from the top group. The only kind of block format that Flashlight Online offers is radio buttons, so there’s no need, and no way, to also select “radio button” from the open format options.

- **What if I want to use more than 8 responses for a custom radio button question**? See “Customize html” below
- **What if I want to combine question types, e.g., multiple choice with the final choice being a blank for the person to add and check their own option?** See “Customize html” below.

User ID’s and Passwords

- If your survey requires an ID, or ID and password, of respondents, a) the system will not let the same ID respond twice to your survey, and b) the data will indicate how each ID responded. In other words, if you want to tell respondents that you will not know what each person said, you must either use the “anonymous” option (no ID required) or else have a set of new IDs (unrelated to people’s names) assigned to your respondents by a third party. The third party can assure you that your respondents, and only your respondents, use the survey and the system will assure that none of them respond twice.
- **Entering a large number of usernames and passwords**: Flashlight Online offers three options: anonymous access to surveys (anyone can go from the survey's URL to the survey and then respond); requires user ID (respondents must enter an eligible ID first), or requires user ID plus password (respondent must enter both a user ID and a password). To set this feature, use "Survey properties." After setting the survey to “require IDs and passwords,” go to “edit survey” and click the “respondent IDs” button (row of dark buttons, third from the right). It may be simplest to enter these usernames and passwords one at a time if you have only a few (5 or fewer) but if you have a list of dozens, hundreds or thousands of respondents, you may need a quicker way to enter this information.

  Flashlight Online asks for the information as a series of separate lines, with each line being formatted like this “username, password” – the username and ID separated by a comma. If you already have this information in a spreadsheet, it’s relatively simple to transfer it to Flashlight Online. If you have a spreadsheet where student IDs are in a column and you want to use a new password for this survey, create a column to the right of the ID’s for each person’s password. If the password happens to be the same for everyone in your class, you can enter it once at the top of the column and then use the “fill down” command (in Microsoft Excel, this is in the “edit” menu) to copy the password down the column. Then copy the area of the spreadsheet that has the usernames and IDs onto a blank word processing document.

  Next, highlight the entire table you’ve created. Then use the table menu to find the “convert” command; convert the table to text. Microsoft Word presents a multiple choice: “Separate text with..” Choose “commas”. Your class list should now have a username and a password on each line, separated by a comma. Copy this whole list as one block of text. If you’re not in the respondent ID area of Flashlight Online already on another screen, log into Flashlight Online, choose your survey, go to the Edit Survey area of Flashlight Online, and click on “respondent IDs.” Then paste your list of respondent IDs and passwords into the “enter respondent IDs” field. Click

OK and you're done. Later if this list needs to be augmented, shortened, or edited, the system makes it reasonably simple to do this one item at a time, or by adding a new block of names, using the same method that you just used.

Customizing Using HTML

- The "Customize HTML" command enables you to change the look and feel of your survey. **Warning: Once you begin customizing a survey, you can no longer add a question,** without losing the customization you've done to that point. When creating a survey, you're actually doing two things at once: creating the look of the survey (which you can modify using html) and creating the database that receives and analyzes the data. Starting the customizing process also ends the ability to modify the database. Customizing, however, does allow many kinds of changes, including:
  - **Changing or adding colors**
  - **Adding pictures or logos** (the file you insert in your survey must already be stored somewhere else on the Web, not on your PC)
  - **Adding text to the middle or at the end of your survey.** In our experience this almost always works without a hitch. But occasionally it can introduce errors – if you're doing this be especially sure to test your survey – make sure that the data flows into 'analyze – before asking your real respondents to fill it in.
  - **Changing fonts, adding boldface and italics, etc.**
  - **Deleting questions**
  - **Combining question types**. Suppose you need more than 8 options for radio button question For example, suppose you want a question that asks, "Which Course Management System" is best?" You'd like to list a dozen choices, from "Angel" to "WebCT." Create two questions in the editing mode. The stem of the first is "Which Course Management System is best?' and it's followed by your first 8 options. Leave the second stem blank and add the rest of your options underneath it. Later, when you're finished (really finished!) adding questions to your survey, shift to html editing and delete the (blank) stem of the second question. If you do this right, to the respondent, the options of both question appear under the first stem. This isn't a perfect workaround. They could choose two answers (one from near the beginning of the list and one from near the end). And, when you analyze data, the raw data will initially be split between your two original questions.
    Another example-adding a "fill in the blank" option to a radio button question. The technique is the same – begin with two separate custom questions – a radio button and a text box. Then, when you go to html customization, combine them so that, to the respondent, they look like one question.
  - **Changing the order of questions**. Be cautious about this, however. It's quite easy to make changes that inadvertently cripple the survey.. FrontPage seems to be particularly unpredictable as a tool; our users have had better luck with Dreamweaver. As awkward as Flashlight Online's tools for reordering questions are, it's usually best to use them to reorder questions and only risk using html editing for this purpose if absolutely necessary and after making a backup copy of your survey.

III. Converting your survey so that respondents can see it online and answer it

- "**Start survey**" has two functions: a) it assigns your completed survey a URL so that respondents can start answering it online, and b) it reformats your survey to a 'read only' format - it can no longer be altered. The two go together - if items could be altered after people began responding, interpreting data would become impossible.

  - "What if I click "Start survey" and then decide I want to alter the survey?" Some changes can be handled with html editing (adding explanations, deleting questions, even changing the wording of questions. But, if you want Flashlight Online to record responses, you cannot add questions after clicking "Start Survey." So click "copy survey" instead. The copy *can* be altered so you leave the 'start'ed survey behind and add your items to the new survey.

IV. Analyzing your data

- Enter the group where the survey is stored and click "Analyze". You have two options: to see a simple display of the data or download it in order to use your own survey software (e.g., Excel, SPSS, NVivo)
- **Authorizing someone else (not the original author of the survey) to download its data.** Only one person at a time is authorized to download data. Your local administrator has the authority to change who 'owns' the survey (who can download data, for example). Give your administrator the name of the group, the ZS number of the survey, and the name of the user to whom you want to transfer this capability. Once the change is made, the second person will be able to download the data, and you will not. The administrator can reverse the authorization later if you like. If your administrator has questions, he or she should contact The TLT Group office (flashlight@tltgroup.org or give us a call -- see http://www.tltgroup.org for our phone number.)

V. Safety Nets

- Test your survey before administering it. Fill it out yourself, submit it, and make sure the data comes in as it should. If having this test data included with your other data is a problem, then make a copy of the 'real' survey and test the copy.
- Even with all these precautions, things can still go wrong. For example, you look at the survey just after sending out a mailing with the URL, and realize that a question is missing or a stupid-looking typo is in the text. One way to minimize the damage: don't send out the URL for the survey itself. Instead create a web page with a button for the survey on the page. Send the address of that web page out to your respondents. That way, if the survey needs to be replaced with an updated copy, the respondents will still come to the right place.