

Purpose

Focus groups can give you rich data about people's opinions, experiences and insights; they are especially good when you want to understand a social phenomenon because the group itself is a social situation

Key Points

- Focus groups usually have 6 – 10 people who have something in common
- They usually last 90 minutes from introduction to closing
- The key is to get people talking with one another about the topic
- The facilitator should prompt conversation with a purpose



What is a focus group guide?

A focus group guide outlines the structure and questions for the group. Focus groups are typically conducted with about 6–10 people who share similar backgrounds. If you are wanting to represent diverse perspectives (e.g., the experiences of students as well as those of teachers), you should conduct separate discussions with each of those groups and then compare what they said.

Focus group guides are relatively short. If you have eight people in the group and one hour for discussion, the protocol should have about four major questions. You will also probe for more detail in response to what the group members share.

The group itself usually takes about 90 minutes from the initial gathering until the closing.

What are the parts of a focus group?

Focus groups have five parts:

- Gathering
- Introductions
- Opening question
- Body of the discussion
- Closing

How should we gather people together?

Even before the discussion starts, work to make the environment comfortable and welcoming. Make sure the entrance is clearly visible so people can find where the group is meeting. Have the entrance be hospitable and welcoming, perhaps having refreshments available and a comfortable place to sit for people who arrive early. Participants should be warmly greeted as they arrive. Help put people at ease, facilitate

informal introductions, and start casual conversation. Have nametags prepared that use first names only and that are printed large enough that during the group discussion people can read one another's nametags from across the circle.

When it's time, invite people to enter the room where the group will be meeting. Make sure the room where you meet is comfortable: well-lit, comfortable temperature, and comfortable seating. Chairs should be arranged in a circle with everyone easily able to see one another. The facilitator should have a space in the circle while the notetaker should sit unobtrusively on the side.

How do we make introductions?

Greet participants and thank them for being there. Explain the purpose of the focus group. Introduce the facilitator and notetaker. Explain how the focus group will work: the facilitator will ask questions to get the conversation started, what you want is to hear about people's opinions and experiences, and encourage them to ask questions of one another and to respond to what one another have said.

Establish what you think are reasonable expectations for confidentiality and protection of privacy. However, note that you cannot guarantee that any individual in the group will maintain confidentiality so people should consider that when they choose what to share. Explain any audio recording you will be doing.

Ask people to introduce themselves. Ask for any other information that is relevant to the purpose of the focus group. For example, students may be asked to identify their year in school, representatives of organizations may be asked to identify their organization and role there, etc. Additionally, include some type of trivia question to help set a personable tone; for example, a talent they have, the most recent trip they took, favorite sport or book, etc.

How do we get the discussion started?

Your opening question should be conversational, clear, brief, and straightforward. Make sure the type of language you use fits the group. Pose only one question to start the discussion. The specific question will depend on what the purpose of the group is. The following are some examples of different types of opening questions that meet different research needs:

- Needs Assessment: What made you become concerned about ____?
 What do you know about ____ in your community?
 How important do you think ____ is in your community?
- Process Evaluation: What did like most about ____?
 What did you get out of ____?
 What were you thinking about during ____?

- Program Impact: What do you think {summarize finding} means?
Why do you think we found this result?
Given this finding, what else do you want to know?

What kinds of questions should we ask?

Main Questions

After they have warmed up with the opening question, move on to your focal questions. Use plain, everyday language. Focus groups are a **conversation with a purpose** so keep the language conversational and focus the questions on your purpose.

Probes

The first key to getting rich, deep responses is to have good probing questions in mind. These are questions that you may or may not ask, but that you use when you need to prompt the group for more detail. Remember that people in the group will look to you for cues about whether they are talking about things you are interested in and how much detail you want. So they will usually start by giving you a relatively brief answer to your question. They will then pause and look at you or wait for another person to speak. If you then ask some probing questions to get more details, you have conveyed: "I am listening to you. I value what you are saying. I want to hear more about it, and here's what I'm most interested in hearing." So probes should be used to **prompt deeper conversation**, not to interrogate.

Developing your probes requires that you know **what an adequate answer is**. This does not mean that you are looking for a specific answer. Rather, it's that you know ahead of time the kinds of details that will make for a full, rich answer.

The following are some common ways to structure probing questions:

- Silent probes: Don't be afraid of silence; give people time to think
Use your body language to show interest
- Uh-huh probes: "I see..."
"Can you say more about that?"
- Clarifying probes: "You mentioned ____ and now you mentioned ____; can you explain more?"
"You said ____ which is different from what {name} said. Why do you think you have a different experience?"
"Remember what the group was talking about ____? Can anyone tell me more about that?"
- Probes for meaning: "Can you give me some examples of ____?"
"What would it look like to do ____?"
"Why is ____ important to you?"

Cross-Talk

The second key to getting rich, deep responses is to generate discussion among the group. As time goes on, they should be talking more to one another and less to you. To foster talk across the table:

- When you see physical expressions that show another person in the group has a response, invite them to talk:
“{Name}, you’re nodding your head. What do you think?”
“{Name}, it looks like you have something to add.”
- Invite general responses to what someone has said:
“What do other people think about ____?”
“What are other people’s experiences with ____?”
- Explicitly invite different opinions and experiences to be shared:
“Does anyone have a different experience with ____?”
“What is a different way of looking at ____?”

How do we end the group?

We usually save one last question for the closing. It is a forward-looking question that helps to end the group, no matter the topic or nature of the discussion, on a positive note. The following are some examples of different types of closing questions that meet different research needs:

- Needs Assessment: What is the most important thing we can do about ____?
 What do you want to see done next about ____?
 What can you do in your community to address ____?
- Process Evaluation: What do you think should be done to improve ____?
 What do you want to see stay the same?
- Program Impact: What do the results of our evaluation mean for what you will do in
 the future?
 What programs/services/____ should be continued?

Finally, you should summarize the major themes that have been discussed. If there will be a way to share the results of your study, explain it. Thank participants for their time and participation. Give them your contact information in case they have questions. If applicable, distribute information about your program/agency and the services you provide.

Recommended Resources

Casey, M. A. () Focus group interviewing. In *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (eds. J.S. Wholey, K. E. Newcomer, & H. P. Hatry). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Hughes, D., & DuMont, K. (1993). Using focus groups to facilitate culturally anchored research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 21, 775—806.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd*