

Focus Group Procedures

1. The following outline describes those considerations important in the creation, administration, and analysis of a focus group. For more complete thoughts and procedures, see Templeton, 1996.¹

Choosing your method

1. Focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry. (Validity is the degree to which a procedure really measures what it proposes to measure.)
2. Examples of purposes for which focus groups are appropriate include: Assessment of community needs and issues; citizens' attitudes, perceptions and opinions on specific topics; impacts of a particular program on individuals and communities.
3. Focus groups are not suited to learning about the needs and issues of an individual, so the topic and questions need to be focused on the community or group.

Choosing your participants

1. Identify and describe the target population as carefully as possible; this will enable you to select a panel representative of that group.
2. Select participants with the purpose of building a group that is comfortable talking together; your goal is to form a relatively homogeneous group.
 - Individuals with common characteristics (age, interest, profession, etc.)
 - Unfamiliar to each other (familiarity tends to inhibit disclosure)
 - Commonality, not diversity
3. Ideally, members of the focus group should be strangers with enough key traits in common that they are comfortable. While this is not always possible, it is important to avoid using participants with certain kinds of relationships.
4. Do not invite spouses to the same focus group or others who might be expected to have undue influence over the other, such as a boss and employee, a teacher and student, a parent and child, etc.
5. Describe recruitment qualifications in advance, in order to avoid bias in the selection process (qualifications may include age, ethnicity, membership in certain groups, etc.).
6. Seek participants through membership lists, directories, and associations whose members you can expect will meet your criteria.
7. Diversity among participants is accomplished through multiple focus group sessions, not through diverse participation in a single event.

Logistics

1. The session is managed by a moderator and an assistant moderator.
2. The number of participants for each focus group should be between 7 and 10; small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share, large enough to provide a variety of perceptions and attitudes. It is advisable to recruit 12 participants and hope that at least seven attend.
3. Each focus group will take between one and a half and two hours, depending on the number of participants and length of responses.
4. The meeting space needs to be a comfortable room for conducting the group.
5. Equipment and materials needed include:
 - A high quality tape or video recorder and high quality microphone
 - Sufficient audio or video tapes or discs to record the session
 - Name tags for participants and moderators (first names only)
 - Notepad for taking notes
 - Form to report/reimburse mileage
 - Educational material for handouts
 - Refreshments if planned
6. Check equipment before the session.

7. Focus groups must be replicated several times; sufficient replication has occurred when discussions become repetitive and when new groups cease to surface any new major themes.

Describing your questions or topics

1. Moderator uses predetermined open-ended questions.
2. Questions appear spontaneous but are carefully designed and in a logical sequence and are memorized by the moderator.
3. The moderator must explain and establish the context for each question.
4. Tips for developing questions:
 - Include fewer than ten questions, usually around five to six total
 - Researchers recommend no more than three topics (with sub-issues under each) for discussion
 - Open-ended questions reveal what's on participants mind about topic
 - Go from general to specific questions
 - "Why" questions are rarely used
 - Take time to develop questions for clarity, precision, phrasing, and brevity
 - Use phrases like "thinking back to..." or "what prompted you..." or "describe" or "if you could change"
 - Encourage conversation and involve others by asking "who can add to that?" or "does everyone accept that?"
 - Close-ended questions might include phrases like "to what extent ..." or "how much..."
 - Test the questions with others; review the sequence of questions and the path of the discussions; pay attention to possible opportunities to probe for detail or clarity
 - The first focus group is actually the pilot test and an opportunity to make any changes that are needed
5. Ending Questions are very important. For your final question, ask something:
 - Reflective ... "All things considered..." This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers. "Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?"
 - Summary question... "Did we hear you?" After the brief oral summary the question asked is: "Is this an adequate summary?"
 - Final question to verify completeness... "Is there something you would like to add?" The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks the participants: "Have we missed anything?"

Selecting your moderator

1. Identify a trained moderator and an assistant to conduct the focus group interview.
2. The moderator creates a warm and friendly atmosphere, is focused and a good listener, directs and keeps the flow of the conversation, is knowledgeable about the topic.
3. The moderator must be skilled at drawing information and opinions from the participants; asks for clarification and teases out detailed information.
4. The moderator must remain neutral and should not influence the discussion while challenging, probing, and exploring each issue.
5. The assistant moderator takes careful notes, monitors recording equipment, and manages logistics.

Time line

1. Check community activities before setting a time and date for the focus group
2. Call potential participants 10-14 days before the session
3. Send personalized invitations one week before
4. Telephone each individual the day before the session

Contacting Perspective Participants:

1. Most important factor in recruiting, what's in it for them?
2. Upon initial contact with perspective participants:
 - Verify their qualifications to be a participant.
 - Briefly tell them why the focus groups are being conducted without discussing the specific questions that will be asked.
 - If they are interested in participating ask for their phone number and address.
 - Ask what days and times would be best for them to attend a focus group.
 - Tell them approximately how long the focus group will take.

Participant Incentives

1. Participants are providing you with a source of data, perceptions, ideas, and attitudes. Because they are necessary for you to conduct your research, it is advisable that they are compensated for their time. The most common technique is to provide "incentives" to participants. Incentives such as meals, coupons, or cash are widely used for focus group participants.
 - \$15-25 is a reasonable incentive for participants who are easy to reach and available any time
 - \$25-50 is reasonable for participants that must meet a number of specific criteria
2. Incentives should be identified in invitations when possible. Knowledge of the incentives helps participants to know that they are appreciated, and that their thoughts are important. Their sense of value to the project will likely improve their participation.
3. Follow-up on your sessions by sending letters to participants, thanking them for their participation.

Managing focus group sessions

1. Before the session begins:
 - Greet the participants as they arrive; be warm and friendly and answer questions they might have without discussing the key questions to be asked during the focus group
 - Hand out and ask participants to fill out registration forms necessary to receive the incentive, mileage reimbursement, etc.
 - Distribute educational material or handouts
 - This is a good time to hand out and collect demographic questionnaires
2. The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment.
 - Deliver a prepared introduction to the focus group that:
 - Thanks participants for coming
 - Tells the participants the purpose of the discussion and the goals for the session
 - Explains the plan for the session, how it will proceed and how participants will contribute
 - Describes the ground rules; (one speaker at a time, please speak up, there are no right or wrong answers, we seek their different opinions, etc.)
 - Describes your recording procedures. Mention that because a tape recorder is being used that it is important for only one person to speak at a time.
 - Remind the participants that all answers are confidential.
 - Offer to answer any questions they might have about how this information will be used.
3. Begin the discussions by asking the opening question. The lead question is often quite general like "what are your thoughts about X?"
4. Make sure that everyone's opinion about that question has a chance to be heard.
5. Follow with your successive questions.
6. Immediately after the focus group
 - Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
 - Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation
 - Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing

What kind of questions do you ask in a focus group?"

Below are some examples of general questions. These apply largely to groups discussing a current program or service, but they can be adjusted for planned programs, as well as for groups dealing with other concerns. The precise language and order of presentation will depend on your topic and group, but some of these questions may be adapted to your own needs.

- "What are some of your thoughts about what's going on now?"
- "Would you say you are satisfied with the current situation, with the way things are going on?"
- (If so) "What are you satisfied about? Why is that?" (Or, "What's going well...?")
- "Are there things you are dissatisfied with, that you would like to see changed?" (Or, "What's not going well...?")
- (If so) "What are they? Why is that? How should they change? What kinds of things would you like to see happen?"
- "How about this particular aspect (of the topic). What do you think about that?"
- *Repeat for different aspects of the topic, with variations in style. For example, if the main focus group topic was "community policing," some key aspects to cover might be visibility, sensitivity, interaction, respect, etc.*
- "Some people have said that one way to improve X is to do Y.
- Do you agree with this?' (Or, "How do you feel about that?")
- "Are there other recommendations that you have, or suggestions you would like to make?"
- "Are there other things you would like to say before we wind up?"
- Some "probes", or follow-ups", designed to get more information on a given question:
 - Can you say more about that?
 - Can you give an example?
 - Jane says X. How about others of you. What do you think?
 - How about you, Joe. [Or, "you folks in the corner over there...."] Do you have some thoughts on this?
 - Does anyone else have some thoughts on that?

Analyzing data

1. Analysis is a systematic process; begin while the group is in session
 - Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
 - Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
 - Consider asking each participant a final preference question
 - Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation
2. Within hours, analyze individual group
 - Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriber for computer entry if transcript is wanted
 - Analyst listens to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available
 - Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
 - Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group
3. Within days, analyze series of groups
 - Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
 - Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
 - Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
 - Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate your points
4. Prepare draft and final reports, circulate
 - Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
 - Use a few quotes to illustrate
 - Sequence could be question by question or by theme
 - Share report with moderator and assistant, and with other researchers

- Revise and finalize report
 - Note themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas
5. Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials

Analysis Tips for Focus Groups

When conducting this analysis remember that you are looking for trends and patterns:

1. **Consider the words.** A variety of words and phrases will be used and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity between these responses. Think about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words.
2. **Consider the context.** Participants respond to stimuli – a question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of the preceding discussion and also by the tone and intensity of the oral comment.
3. **Consider the internal consistency.** Participants in focus groups change and sometimes even reverse their positions after interaction with others. This phenomenon rarely occurs in individual interviews due to a lack of interaction from other participants. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.
4. **Consider the frequency or extensiveness of comments.** Some topics are discussed by more participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often (frequency) than others. These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received limited attention. Did you expect and not receive certain comments?
5. **Consider the intensity of the comments.** Sometimes participants talk about a topic with a special intensity or emotion. Note when participants use words that illustrate their strength of feeling. Intensity may go undetected analyzing transcripts alone because the tone of voice, speed and emphasis on certain words is not recorded.
6. **Consider the specificity of responses.** Specific responses, based on personal experience, should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. Greater weight is often placed on responses that are in the first person (as opposed to hypothetical answers) or when respondents can provide specific details when asked a follow-up question. For example, "I feel the new technique has increased my income" has more weight than "the methods will help people make more money."
6. **Find the big ideas.** The researcher can get so close to a multitude of comments and details that trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion are missed. One of the traps of analysis is not seeing the big ideas. It may be helpful to take a few steps back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for the big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

ⁱ Templeton, Jane Farley. 1996. *The Focus Group: A Strategic Guide to Organizing, Conducting and Analyzing the Focus Group Interview* (revised edition) McGraw Hill Trade.

ⁱⁱ This section is reproduced by permission from the University of Kansas. Visit The Community Tool Box: <http://ctb.ku.edu>.