



Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a group interviewing process that is used for gathering *qualitative* information from a small number of participants. It is a powerful tool for gaining an understanding of thoughts, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors about particular issues, topics, or programs. Focus groups are an efficient means to gather “open-ended,” subjective, and in-depth responses from multiple viewpoints in a safe, non-threatening environment. A good moderator is essential to this process. A well-conducted focus group can provide insights that are difficult to obtain through other data-gathering techniques.

The purpose of the focus group is to collect data related to your inquiry question in a setting that allows for interaction and encourages deep thinking about important issues. The group environment compels participants to think about other people’s responses in relation to their own, and encourages them to formulate and express their own impressions. In listening and responding to others, participants can correct misinformation and provide alternative perspectives. Typically, common and shared views emerge as well as divergent and independent views. However, a focus group is not a problem solving session or a way to reach consensus on a decision. There are other group processes to use for those purposes.

Positioning your focus group

Be clear about your reasons for choosing a focus group to collect data. A focus group is an appropriate means for obtaining a diversity of perspectives, opinions, and/or experiences. You might want to write a “positioning” explanation that expresses why a focus group is a good data collection choice. For example, a positioning explanation related to an inquiry about the college schedule might read: “The college needs to make decisions about what adjustments are needed in the revised schedule. As part of the basis for making this decision we want to understand student, faculty, staff and administrator experiences with the new schedule and their views on ways to improve the use of instructional time.” This explanation clarifies that the experiences of multiple groups are being sought, rather than just a count of how many students and faculty support the new schedule. By creating this “positioning” statement, CLIP members can ensure that they agree on what information the focus group will collect – and not collect—and that the goals and the collection method are aligned. It also will be useful to include this statement in your invitation to those you invite to the focus group.

Developing your focus group questions

As with individual interview questions, how you state the question can strongly influence how participants respond. Use open-ended questions that elicit diverse points of view, are neutral in construction and do not provide predetermined responses. For example, asking “How do you feel about the revised schedule?” only allows participants to talk about their level of satisfaction with the schedule. Asking “In what ways has the revised schedule affected you this semester?” allows participants to discuss a range of both positive and negative influences. The moderator then can follow up on various themes or issues that emerge from participants’ responses. Pose questions that will elicit both positive and negative responses about the topic. Straying too far in either direction will bias the data. For a 1.5 to 2-hour session, ask ten questions or less.

Ask questions that allow participants to answer in the terms that are salient for them. For example, if your questions about the schedule only ask about changes in the time of day courses are offered, you are apt to miss issues related to which term a course is offered, the number of sections being offered, etc. As appropriate, you may want to ask specific questions about each of these schedule issues.

Your inquiry question will drive your focus group questions, but be open to unexpected issues that emerge in the course of the focus group and follow up on those as time allows.

Test the questions on a sample group to check for bias, understand what the range of responses might be, and fine-tune the questions to encourage all to share their insights.

Identifying focus group participants

The primary rationale to use in choosing focus group attendees is that they are affected by the issue or topic and they have ability to give you a range of answers. Determine whose perspectives, opinions, and/or experiences are relevant to your inquiry question. Consider demographic attributes such as age, income, ethnicity, and affiliations to ensure you are getting a representative sample. In the example above related to the college schedule, the CLIP was interested in the experiences of students, faculty, staff members and administrators, as each group experiences the schedule changes differently.

In most instances establish a focus group for each of the role groups identified so each focus group is drawn from the broader group the participants represent. Having a safe environment in which people feel they can express their points of view usually means creating groups according to shared characteristics such as role or ethnicity. Avoid mixing individuals who have obvious power relationships or predictably different viewpoints, for example, faculty and students.

Eight to 12 participants is a desirable number in a focus group. This allows the moderator to make good eye contact with them, have a more personal conversation, and

track non-verbal expressions. Smaller focus groups (4-8 people) ensure that all members can participate fully. Consider whether you will get the best interaction for your purpose if the members know one another or are strangers to each other.

Consider how many focus groups you will need to adequately represent the desired perspective, for example, how many focus groups of students or how many groups of faculty members. It is valuable to conduct at least two focus groups for each role group so you can compare responses from group to group. Make sure that you are able to conduct the number of focus groups that are needed to adequately represent the desired population(s).

Caution: If an individual has been extremely vocal and public on the topic of discussion, it may be best to exclude him/her from the focus group. He/she could distort the group's discussion. Instead, gather that person's views through other means.

Recruiting participants

Getting participants to the focus group can be a challenge. If you want to have eight to 12 participants, you may need to invite up to 24 in order to get the desired group size. You should plan to over-recruit by at least 25% due to make up for no-shows.

Send a written invitation by letter or email with an RSVP. Personalize the invitations and explain why you want their opinions. Specify the place, date and time, including the length of the focus group. Typically focus groups last one and a half hours.

Make follow-up phone calls to confirm attendance, explain the process, inquire about special needs (e.g., handicap access), and to thank them for their time and insights they are going to provide. Consider sending a reminder email the day before the focus group. (See below for a sample email invitation)

Provide an incentive (e.g., food) to encourage participation. Many people will attend without an incentive, but it is helpful to offer a small token of appreciation and/or meals or snacks during the focus group. In some cases, it may be necessary to provide a small monetary incentive but do not offer "too much" as it may bias responses.

Selecting a location and time

The environment should be comfortable, non-threatening, and conveniently located. Select a neutral location that is large enough for everyone to fit comfortably and is readily accessible to the participants. Ensure that the site is handicapped accessible and that any other assistance for those with disabilities is provided (e.g., sign language interpreter). Check for any sources of background noise that would interfere with taping the session.

Choose times that are convenient for participants in order to increase the numbers who will be able to participate. Consider one focus group in the day time and another in the evening in order to accommodate various schedules.

Identifying a moderator

Having a good moderator is essential to gathering good qualitative data. The ideal moderator is a good strategic questioner and quickly puts people at ease. He or she builds a rapport with the group so there is a level of trust and candor. A good moderator also will keep the group focused and on track and utilize a series of techniques to gain maximum participation and feedback. If possible find a trained moderator.

A CLIP member may not be the best person to moderate the focus group, particularly if participants might not be open with that person, for example, if students of the CLIP member are in the group. In such instances, use a third party to run the focus groups.

If the focus group is gathering perceptions of a disenfranchised group, use a member of that group as moderator rather than an outside party.

Conducting the focus group

The moderator's job is to conduct the focus group beginning with introductions, setting the ground rules of the session, and gaining agreement from the participants about the progression of events (See below for a sample focus group schedule). Thank the participants for coming and reiterate the purpose of the focus group. Note its expected length, that it will be recorded, how the data will be used, and that lunch/dinner/snacks will be served, if applicable. Thank the participants again on behalf of the organization for whom the focus group is conducted.

Describe the topic to be discussed. As appropriate, show audio-visual presentations, handouts, and/or products that explain the focus of the group's conversation. After confirming that the participants understand the issue or topic, remind them that you want their honest opinions and pose the first question.

Employ probing techniques to encourage people to elaborate on their thoughts or feelings and even reveal underlying assumptions and beliefs. Redirect the conversation to other participants if one person begins to dominate the discussion. Draw out those who are not participating. Be attuned to when a question has been addressed adequately and pose a new question. Remain neutral in your responses to participants' comments.

Attend to participants' body language. For example, you could say, "Don, you are shaking your head...what are you thinking?" From time to time, summarize what you are hearing and ask the participants if the summary is correct. This technique encourages respondents to elaborate or clarify their points and can lead to other valuable discussions.

At the end of the session, turn off the recording devices and ask for additional comments or suggestions that might be valuable to the process, as some will share additional information when it is not being recorded. Some will wait until this point to present

ideas that they want heard but that did not fit the questions that were asked. These often are very valuable comments.

When the participants have left, write down as much information as you can remember from the session including impressions about individuals and the group, and notes about your performance that might not be evident from the transcription of the session.

Assisting the moderator

It is very useful to have a person assisting the moderator. This person takes care of details so that the moderator is not distracted. The assistant takes care of the recording and projection equipment, helps with refreshments, prepares name tags, monitors room temperature, and attends to all the small details that can make a focus group go smoothly.

The assistant also takes notes to compare against the recording, clarifies words from soft spoken individuals, makes notations about body language and, if asked to do so by the moderator, makes observations about the moderator that can help him or her do a better job at the next session.

In choosing an assistant, consider whether the particular person's presence will hinder the conversation. In some instances, it may be best not to have a CLIP member taking notes or observing; in other cases this will not matter. Think this issue through so that participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences. The advantage of having CLIP members present is that they have an opportunity to hear directly from the participants and get a richer picture of the conversation. If CLIP members or others are observing, have them sit off to the side, as they will not be part of the conversation. Explain to the participants why the observers are present.

Recording

Audio or video recording enhances the accuracy of the content shared in the focus group as well as the speaker's intonations. Videos provide additional detail by showing participants' reactions and body language.

Test your equipment prior to the focus group to ensure that your microphone will pick up the voices of all participants. Come prepared with extra batteries and tapes.

Analyzing data

Writing up the focus group report

When all focus groups are completed, analyze the transcripts and notes using qualitative data analysis methods. You might begin by analyzing each focus group session by question and then looking at each question across the sessions and groups. You can analyze the data by themes, responses to questions, demographics, or cross-groups.

Look for themes that emerge from the data and different groups' responses to the themes.

See documents entitled “Tips for Analyzing Qualitative Data” and “Actively Illustrating Analysis and Interpretation of Interview Data” in Module 5 for information on how to analyze the information from your focus group.

When writing a report of the focus group(s), begin with a one or two page summary of your findings. In the summary include a brief overview of the project, a statement about what groups were represented in the focus groups, a sentence or two on methodology and the person or group that prepared the report.

Have one sentence in the first or second paragraph that is the unknown “ah-ha” and captures the essence of your findings. In this paragraph, describe in a nutshell the essence of the entire report. Include general impressions of the data and offer insights and suggestions based on the findings. As appropriate, use quotes from the focus group sessions to underscore your points. Use a style that can be easily understood by your intended audience.

Sample Invitation Email

Date

Good morning!

As a second-year student at Hillcrest Community College, you know that we reduced the number of weeks in the semester this year to save money. Now that we've lived with this new schedule for a few months, we want to learn more about student, faculty, staff, and administrator experiences with it.

We cordially invite you to join other students in a focus group to talk about this issue. We want to hear your opinions and ideas in order to create the best learning environment for our students within our budget. Here is information about the time and location of the focus group.

Date _____

Time _____

Location _____

The group will consist of about seven other students and a moderator plus all the pizza you can eat!

Please send us a reply to this email by _____ to let us know if you will be able to join us for this focus group.

Sincerely,
Jim Jones, Dean of Students
Sally Rodriquez, Student Government President

Sample Focus Group Schedule

Moderator Introduction

Thank you and purpose (1 minute)

Hello. My name is _____. I'd like to start off by thanking each of you for taking time to come today. We'll be here for about an hour and a half.

The reason we're here today is to get your opinions and attitudes about issues related to [issue].

I'm going to lead our discussion today. I am not here to convince you of anything or try to sway your opinion. My job is just to ask you questions and then encourage and moderate our discussion.

I also would like to introduce [name of recorder]. [He or she] will be recording our discussion today for my report.

Ground rules (2 minutes)

To allow our conversation to flow more freely, I'd like to go over some ground rules.

1. Only one person speaks at a time.
2. Please avoid side conversations.
3. Everyone doesn't have to answer every single question, but I'd like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.
4. This is a confidential discussion in that I will not report your names or who said what to the college. Names of participants will not even be included in the final report about this meeting. It also means that, except for the report that will be written, what is said in this room stays in this room. When you walk out of here, what you remember the most is what you should not be talking about.
5. We stress confidentiality because we want an open discussion. We want all of you to feel free to comment on each other's remarks without fear that your comments will be repeated later and possibly taken out of context.
6. There are no "wrong answers," just different opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you're the only one who feels that way. Don't let the group sway you. But if you do change your mind, just let me know.
7. Let me know if you need a break. The bathrooms are [location].

Introduction of participants (10 minutes)

Before we start, I'd like to know a little about each of you. Please tell me:

- Your name
- How long you have been involved with the college

General questions (10 minutes)

[Begin with general questions that give everyone the opportunity to weigh in on something that is non-threatening.]

Specific questions (30 minutes)

[Plan to use about five questions in a 30-minute period.]

Closing question (10 minutes)

[For the closing question ask a question about what advice they would give regarding the topic and to whom.]

Closing (2 minutes)

Thanks for coming today and talking about these issues. Your comments have given me lots of different ways to see this issue. I thank you for your time.

(Source: Adapted from *Conducting Focus Groups* by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Available for free download at www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF.)