

Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

Collaborative Programs Research & Evaluation

General Tips

- Start by writing a “purpose” paragraph to help frame all of your questions on only key issues
- Questions should not be easily answered by “yes” or “no” and should encourage participants to elaborate on answers
- Include follow-up questions: Be aware of what answers you expect participants to give and when you consider a question sufficiently answered
- Each focus group should include at least one of each of the following types of questions:
 - Engagement: Ice breaker that gives everyone a chance to speak and get to know each other
 - Exploration: Questions that speak to your research interests
 - Exit: Give participants the chance to add any additional comments, ask questions, and make sure nothing was missed
- Avoid double-barreled items: avoid asking more than one question in an item; be wary when you use the words “and” “or”
- Simple wording: are respondents competent enough to answer the question, do they know what terms and acronyms mean?
- Irrelevant items: make sure the questions relate to the experience of your participants
- Keep items short: cut out extra words. Be concise. Rule of thumb: questions should be short enough to fit on one line
- Negatively worded items are confusing: try to phrase items positively

- Write 8-12 questions plus probes for a 1 hour focus group. Try to map out how much time you want to allot to each question. This will help ensure each question is answered and participants don't talk in circles on one particular item
- You want to leave at least 60-75 minutes for the focus group, plus additional time: in case people are late, for students to get refreshments, fill out consent forms and background questionnaires. Two hours is a good amount of time. Have a strategy for coping with late comers
- Incentive: offer a small incentive (e.g. \$50-\$75) such as a gift card to a coffee shop or bookstore and promotional materials (e.g. pens). Make the incentive clear during recruitment and distribute the incentive when the focus group is complete
- Submit an IRB proposal if you plan to disseminate the results. Allot about 2-3 months for this to give them time to review the application and revise and resubmit, if necessary
- Be sure to collect background information about participants (it is important to see if you got a representative sample and might help explain some trends in the data)

Recruitment

- Create an excel spreadsheet with the names and important background and contact information of all eligible participants
- There are several strategies that could be used to identify study participants. The goal of any sampling strategy is to identify a representative mix of participants
- Random sampling is typically best. This is a simple flip of the coin method in which all participants have an equal chance of being selected to participate
- Stratified sampling- When sub populations vary considerably (e.g. HS vs. GED), sometimes it is advantageous to first sort the population by this variable, than randomly select participants from within each strata to ensure representation from all populations
- If there is a particular group you want more in depth information about, hold a separate focus group for that sub population
- Ideal focus group size: 7 to 10 participants: want the group to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that people feel left out
- Make sure you sign up extra people in case people fail to show up

- Hold multiple focus groups to ensure you receive a wide range of responses (3 or 4 per population depending on budget, time constraints, and participant pool). You know you've conducted enough focus groups when you stop hearing new ideas in the discussion indicating that you've reached a saturation point.
- Arrange for a time and location that your population could attend (a variety of times to choose from is probably best).
- Try to accommodate any special request (e.g. babysitting)
- Try to contact participants using multiple methods: regular letter by mail, e-mail, facebook, and phone calls 2-4 weeks in advance. Once you get participants who would like to participate, be sure to follow up with an e-mail and phone calls giving them all of the important information (reminder of the purpose, date, time, location, duration, incentive, dress code). Follow up multiple times leading up to the day of the focus group.
- During recruitment, you might want to use a script in which you introduce yourself, give them information about the research and why they were selected, let them know that the focus group will be taped and that they will receive a gift card and food (if applicable).
- Create a separate roster for each focus group containing the names and important background/contact information and comment space for all students who agree to participate during a particular session. Use this to keep track of further contact with participants.

Protocol

- Welcome participants and offer them refreshments (if applicable)
- Make the introductions, inform them of the purpose of the study
- Administer the consent form. Answer any questions they may have before they sign
- Start audio-recorder (if consent was given and proper approval obtained)
- Ask them to make up a nickname or only use first names during the focus groups to ensure confidentiality. Have these names on a name tag and ask them to write them on all materials.

- Collect all materials and have an assistant review them
- Ice-breaker- Begin with a non-intimidating, topic-relevant question. This gave them a chance to speak and get to know each other
- Begin asking main focus group questions, probe for details where needed
- End by asking them if they had any additional question/comments: this gives participants the chance to add any additional comments, ask questions, and make sure nothing was missed
- Thank participants and remind them of the importance of their help
- Administer demographics questionnaire (if applicable)
- Administer incentives (if applicable)
- Give them contact information in case there were any issues that came up or questions they had that they want to discuss privately
- Turn off recorder, clean room, download audio tape
- Assistant Moderator: Welcome participants and lead them to the focus group room
 - Collect all materials and verify that everything is filled out completely and collected from all participants
 - Follow along to make sure the discussion stays on schedule
 - Make sure that the Moderator doesn't skip any questions or probes (if certain parts of the question are not addressed)
 - Take notes
 - Record names/nicknames of students who make statements without first stating their nickname (if only using audio recording)
 - Record non-verbal behavior

Tips for Facilitating Focus Groups

Do

- It is useful to tape the focus group, but proper consent must be obtained
- Introduce yourself and any assistants
- Provide an opening statement thanking participants for coming, summarizing the purpose and procedures, encouraging them to share their viewpoints (positive or negative), and listening to and respecting each other
- Use a neutral, yet comfortable and inviting tone of voice and facial expression
- Try to outline the amount of time allotted for each question and try to stay roughly on track
- Ask questions to clarify and increase understanding
- Ensure that each participant contributes
- Give people time to think; be comfortable with silences
- Be respectful of all viewpoints and instruct those in the group to do the same
- Use plain language; avoid college jargon

Don't

- Don't try to guide the participants to your own conclusion
- Don't share your own opinions and experiences
- Don't dominate the conversation
- Don't allow anyone to ridicule someone else's comments
- Don't challenge the accuracy of participants' knowledge or views
- Don't translate jargon or slang terms (if someone asks what a term means, ask the individual using the term to explain what he or she means)