

Tips for Summarizing Focus Group Results

Collaborative Programs Research & Evaluation

After you have conducted the focus groups, you will have a set of transcripts which constitute *narrative* or *qualitative* data. Analyzing qualitative data consists essentially of revealing the themes (commonly held viewpoints) and useful insights (viewpoints not necessarily commonly held, but creative ideas that might be useful for program planning). Here are some practical tips for uncovering themes and useful insights from your focus group data.

FINDING THEMES

When you have more than one transcript, it can be useful to electronically cut and paste all of the answers to one question in one document. If your groups had different characteristics (e.g. current students and non-students), be sure to note in your document which group the data came from. Read through the focus group transcripts, or the aggregated transcript. It may be easier to print the transcript(s) out for this step. Make notations next to the text that indicate the themes that you are seeing. In qualitative data analysis, these themes are called “codes.” When you have finished, read over the data again. You may want to re-code into new themes, or re-name your codes (because when you create themes and categories as you go, earlier coded text did not have the chance to fit into a newer created theme). As you do this, think about the following questions:

- Are there themes and sub-themes that should go together?
- Should you merge or split any themes?

IDENTIFYING UNIQUE INSIGHTS

As you code your data, it will become obvious which opinions are widespread, and which opinions are held by only one or just a few people. When an opinion is not widely shared, you need to judge whether the opinion is worth including in your findings. Sometimes these unusual opinions are not worth including because they don't tell you anything about your population. However, sometimes individuals come up with very creative ideas, and you may want to share them in your needs assessment because they can provide a unique perspective not seen elsewhere.

USING QUOTATIONS IN YOUR REPORT NARRATIVE

Hearing the voices of the local population can be very compelling, and they should be used alongside survey results to illuminate the numbers. Here are a few rules to follow to make good use of quotations.

- Direct quotes from informants often don't parse grammatically, or are not completely clear out of context. It is up to the writer to edit them so that they are perfectly clear.
- Instead of putting quotes directly into the paragraphs (how they are often used in a newspaper), write up whatever you want to say, and place illustrative quotes in a text box. Having said that, sometimes it makes the most sense to quote directly in the paragraph – if that really is the case, do that, but use this technique sparingly.