

Focus Groups

*Design and Process*¹

What is a focus group?

- A focus group consists of small group discussions used for the purpose of learning more about the experiences, perceptions, and emotions of a segment of a specific population. A focus group collects data from homogeneous people in a group situation through a focused discussion.
- The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants.
- Focus group interviewing is about paying attention, being open to what people have to say and being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share. It is about being careful and systematic with the things people tell you.

When is a focus group used?

- A focus group can be used for **planning** advertising campaigns, policy making, goal setting, and quality improvement.
- A focus group can also be used for **evaluating** customer satisfaction, employee/student engagement, organizational development, and the like.

What is the process?

- First, plan and prepare.
 - What is the purpose of this focus group? What is the problem being addressed? What information do you want? How will the findings be used?
 - Who can give you the type of information you want? How many groups do you need? What are your available resources?
 - What are the rights and ethical boundaries surrounding your participants?
 - How much time do you have?
 - What questions should you incorporate?
 - a. Write open-ended questions to spark conversation instead of single-word responses.
 - b. Construct simple questions using familiar terms and avoiding judgmental tones or phrases.
 - c. Avoid technical jargon, acronyms, or other ideas that may confuse participants.
 - d. Write more questions than what is needed, and divide them into levels based on priority.
- Second, conduct the focus group using a **moderator** and **recorder/note-taker**.

¹ Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

- How should you establish a welcoming and open environment that allows for honest responses?
 - a. Indicate that all cell phones or portable devices should be turned off or on silent and put away.
 - b. Emphasize that no right or wrong answer exists and that respondents are welcome to indicate when they do not know the answer to a question.
 - c. Ask all respondents to listen respectfully to each other and wait until the previous person is finished before they provide feedback.
- What is the role of the **moderator**?
 - a. The moderator facilitates the discussion and listens attentively.
 - b. He/she presents singular questions that will prompt conversation.
 - c. The moderator allows for time to process the question while also probing deeper should the situation require it.
 - d. He/she manages the conversation so that all participants have roughly the same amount of time to speak.
- What is the role of the **recorder/note-taker**?
 - a. The recorder notes basic information such as the date, time, topic, and number/demographics of participants.
 - b. He/she also summarizes responses from all points of view.
 - c. The recorder captures quotes of special importance as well as nonverbal communication (i.e., body language) of participants.
 - d. He/she helps monitor the time.
- Finally, review and summarize.
 - What should be done with the observations?
 - a. Spend the 15-30 minutes immediately following the focus group interview to debrief and review notes.
 - b. Make note of themes and ideas that can be pursued further with subsequent focus groups.
 - What is placed in the summary report?
 - a. Finalize overall themes (i.e., big ideas) of responses.
 - b. Provide summaries of responses of individual questions.
 - c. Incorporate direct quotes to provide insight.
 - d. Remove all focus group participants' names to protect confidentiality.
 - e. Proofread, edit, and clarify as needed.

What are some tips?

- Keep the topic of the interview focused.
- Select participants who maintain similarities in ways that are important to the research goals.
- Include 6–12 participants per session.
- Conduct a minimum of three (3) focus groups per topic.