

General Guidelines for Focus Groups

This resource provides some tips on conducting focus groups. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead provides information in areas where people tend to have difficulties or problems. While these tips should be used as general guidelines, please note that they are not rules set in stone. What is most important is that your formative research provides you with meaningful information, so sometimes these “rules” can be broken.

Information for this section comes from: *The Focus Group Kit* by David Morgan and Richard Krueger and the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity’s technical assistance experience. If you plan to conduct focus groups, it is highly recommended that you work with someone experienced with focus groups or go through training that is more in-depth than this document. The information presented here will not teach you how to conduct a focus group, but simply provides helpful tips and information you can use when conducting them.

1. How many focus groups do I need?

Ideally, you’ll be able to have focus groups until you reach a point of saturation. This means that you end up hearing roughly the same things from a new group that you’ve heard in other groups. This is how you know you’ve covered the topic as completely as possible. If this isn’t feasible, try to schedule at least two groups per audience. For example, if you’re doing groups with high school students and need to separate them into boys and girls, you’ll need at least two groups with boys and two with girls, for a total of four groups. The more splits you make, the more complicated the planning, so only split when necessary.

2. How long should the focus group last?

Limit the time for a focus group to two hours or less. Usually somewhere between 60 and 120 minutes is ideal. If you’re doing groups with children, the younger the children, the shorter the group should be.

3. How do I get people to come to the groups?

When recruiting participants for your groups, you should develop a protocol for contacting potential participants, along with screening questionnaires to find participants who meet your criteria. Before you schedule a focus group or try to recruit participants, make sure you know who you want to recruit. If there are specific characteristics you are looking for in participants (e.g., be a certain age, have a certain number of children, have certain current behaviors), you can use a screening questionnaire to determine if someone is eligible to participate or not.

Usually a financial incentive is offered to people who participate in focus groups. If this is not possible, or if you are still having a difficult time recruiting participants, you may need to see if other barriers exist. Make sure the location you hold the groups is convenient, as well as the date and time. Offering other incentives such as free childcare, transportation, or meals can be appropriate for some groups.

4. Who should moderate our groups?

The best moderator is not necessarily someone with the most experience at moderating, but someone who can help you learn the most from the participants. In some cases, this could be an experienced, paid moderator. Experienced moderators may be unfamiliar with the topic area and therefore may lead participants to explain themselves more instead of assuming that the moderator knows what they are talking about. In other cases, an outside professional can intimidate the audience or make them uncomfortable. Whether you hire someone or use one of your own staff, make sure the moderator speaks the same language as the participants and is similar enough to the participants that they feel comfortable sharing with him or her.

5. What does the moderator need to know?

If you hire a moderator, spend some time communicating with him/her about your project. The moderator should understand the purpose of your research and what you want to accomplish with the groups. You may want to prioritize questions in your guide and talk about this with the moderator. This way the moderator can judge the amount of time you have left, if the group is going longer than expected, and can cut the less important questions.

6. Should I go to the focus groups myself?

If you can unobtrusively observe the groups, you should definitely do so. Not only will this give you a sense for how people are responding to the questions, you will also be able to confer with the moderator between groups to make any changes or adjustments. If the groups are set up with a one-way mirror and an observing room, have as many people on your planning team observe as possible. If the groups are in a room without a one-way mirror, limit the number of observers to one or two. You may want to have the observers serve as note takers so there's a good reason for them to be in the room.

7. What kinds of questions are best for focus groups?

- The goal is to create conversation. Ask open-ended questions. When you're writing questions, read them aloud to see how they sound.
- Stick to one thought/idea per question. You may think you're asking one question when you are really asking two (or more!). Look for words like "and" or "or" to see if you're including two concepts in one question. For example: "Did you eat breakfast or lunch yesterday?" People may not know how to respond—maybe they ate breakfast but skipped lunch.
- At the beginning of the group you may want to start with one or two general questions that will allow each group member a chance to speak and can reinforce their similarities. These may or may not be related to your research questions.
- Use "think back" phrasing when asking participants to reflect on their personal experiences. Ask participants to "think back" to a certain point in time (last week, yesterday, last year) to ground their responses in a specific experience. This lets them know you want them to be specific in their responses and not generalize to what other people might think.
- Avoid asking "why". Answers to this question are often rationalized and socially-acceptable, which may not necessarily be true or reliable. People can also become defensive when asked "why" repeatedly. Sometimes "why" questions can be broken down into questions about influence ("What influenced you to ...?") and attributes ("What features do you ...?").
- Use the shortest way of asking a question clearly.
- If you use examples, give them as probes after participants have already given their insights.
- For sequencing questions:
 - Ask general questions before specific questions
 - Positive before negative
 - Un-cued before cued

8. Am I allowed to change a question once the groups have started?

You can change questions in the middle of your focus groups if you find that something isn't working. You may need to change the order of questions, drop some, or add new ones. Change a question if it clearly doesn't work (people are silent, say they don't understand, or talk w/o answering the question), if saturation has occurred (you have already heard all of the responses, they become very predictable), or if past responses bring up an interesting lead and you wish to probe more deeply.

9. Can I use the group to get information about more than one topic?

Try to limit the number of topics you cover in your groups. If you must jump between two different topics, include a transition so the participants know what is going on.