

# Private: How to plan and run a focus group (qualitative data)

**Focus groups are a special type of group, with a certain structure, used to get information from a clearly defined group of people. If you do them in the right way, for the right purpose, you can get high quality, rich, descriptive information about people's thoughts and experiences (qualitative data).**

Focus groups are designed to share control of the conversation with the participants, and that means they can generally respond in any way to the questions you ask; you will nearly always hear things that surprise you.

Focus groups aren't:

- a meeting
- a rally
- a forum
- a self-help circle.

Focus groups are:

- a group of 6–12 people
- people who are similar in one or more ways, or who have an interest in the same issue (eg they all have young children, or they all live in a particular area)
- a facilitated discussion
- a discussion on a clearly defined subject
- a structured exercise to get information about the opinions of the focus group members.

Here's a step-by-step guide on how to plan and run a focus group.

## Is a focus group the right tool for you to use?

Focus groups can give you some information about the outcomes of projects or services. The information will be subjective (that is, a reflection of individual's personal views and experiences) and it will be descriptive (not something that can be measured). But the information *can* give you a good sense of whether your clients or other stakeholders are satisfied with your service or program, what they think is working and why. You will probably need to gather other outcomes information, but focus group information is extremely useful to add to the mix. For example, you can present focus group information as 'the story behind the numbers'.

A focus group is a small group of people whose views and experiences will add to the information that you are collecting. They aren't necessarily considered to be representative of a broader group.

## Focus groups are useful for:

- a deeper understanding of people's feelings, thoughts, experiences or beliefs
- sharing control of information gathering with the people from whom you are getting the information – it is a participatory form of research

- gathering information to inform the development of a survey
- gathering information to add to and help understand other information you collect
- collecting information for an evaluation that has a mixture of methods
- enabling participation from people with literacy problems, and from children
- obtaining information in people's own words
- getting really clear about what people mean because you can ask people to explain what they mean if you don't understand, and you can ask follow-up questions
- information that is easy for stakeholders to understand
- getting information more quickly and cheaply than you could through a series of one-to-one interviews.

And the best thing is, they are really FLEXIBLE!

## Focus groups do not:

- give you information about how much progress an individual client or participant has made
- give you a 'random sample' of people
- enable you to extrapolate from the information you get to say 'x% of people said this or that'
- provide a good way of exploring private topics or things that people care very deeply about, because people will avoid talking about sensitive issues and they will avoid conflict
- give reliable information on topics that produce extremely strong feelings.

So remember, you can't assume that the views and experiences of people in the focus group represent those of other groups of people.

## Prepare your questions

Keep your questions to less than 10. Try to make sure they flow logically from one idea to the next.

It's important your questions sound natural and conversational. Don't ask them as if you are asking a survey. The best questions are SOO good (SOO = Short, Open-ended and One-at-a-time).

An example of an open-ended question is 'what was your experience of working with the counsellor?' Closed questions ask for 'yes' or 'no' answers. A closed question is 'was working with the counsellor good?'

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## How to organise your questions:

1. **Opening questions.** These are ice-breakers to get people comfortable. They should be easy to answer.  
*Eg: Can you tell us your first name and when you started using our program?*
2. **Transition questions.** Provide a link between the introductory question and the key questions.  
*Eg: Think back to when you first became involved in the program. What were your first impressions?*
3. **Key questions.** These focus on the major areas of concern. They should take most of the time in the focus group.  
*Eg: In what way is your life different because of your participation in the program?*
4. **Ending question.** These bring the session to a close.  
*Eg: Is there anything else that we should have talked about, but didn't?*

Adapted from Rennekamp R & Nall n.d., M [Using Focus Groups in Program Development and Evaluation](#), University of Kentucky

## Find your participants

You may think that inviting a group of diverse people to a focus group will help you to hear a wide range of views but unfortunately focus groups don't work like that. People tend to censor themselves if they are in a group of people who are different from themselves in terms of power, status, jobs, education, income or personal characteristics.

To get the best quality information you need to invite people who are alike in some way, 'similar' according to some criterion. You need to decide what that criterion is. Your decision needs to be based on what type of community you are working with, and the topic of the focus group.

If you need to get a wide range of views it will be necessary to hold a number of focus groups.

Focus groups have a high dropout rate. Some researchers advise inviting twice as many people as you hope to have attend! Incentives can help, especially food and reimbursements for travel and parking costs. You can offer money or a voucher for attending but the offer must not be so significant that it might influence someone's decision to attend against their better judgement. For more information see – **Information on prizes, reimbursements and incentives (LINK)**.

You also need to get signed consent forms from people who are participating, see

- [How to meet ethical standards concerns when you gather outcomes information from clients.](#)
- [How to get informed consent to gather information from clients.](#)

## Running your focus groups

Here are some tips for running your focus group:

- You need a facilitator who is experienced and aware of their responsibilities. You may need to engage and pay someone to do this.
- Ideally, you also need a second person as an observer and to take notes as comprehensively as they can. They are also the 'odd job' person – looking after anyone arriving late, ensuring the room is comfortable etc. The second person should not interact with the group discussion.
- If you can, with the group's permission, record the session. With luck the conversation will flow and your note taker will be hard pressed to keep up. This makes your recording a vital backup. The second person can ensure the recording equipment is working properly.
- Don't jump in after a participant finishes speaking; allow pauses after questions or comments. Some facilitators suggest a five second pause; this allows other participants to have the chance to speak. You want your participants to interact with each other.
- Most focus groups go for 60 – 90 minutes. More than that is too long as people get too tired.
- An effective focus group has good conversation; the facilitator plays the difficult role of letting the conversation ebb and flow while keeping it on track.
- The facilitator should write notes immediately after the focus group finishes; record their observations of the participants and their characteristics, the mood in the room and the key themes talked about. (And how the questions worked if you are going to do it again.)
- make sure you tell people in the focus group how the information you collect will be used.

If you have facilitation skills, you can run focus groups via teleconference or video link. Face-to-face is easier though.

You can also run a focus group with people who do not interact or meet. To do this you interview each person separately. Anonymous summaries of each person's perceptions or ideas are given to each other member for comment. This isn't as spontaneous as a focus group but it does allow people to react to, and comment on, each other's ideas. This is called 'Nominal Group Technique' and is recommended for special conditions such as: specialised groups of people who can't be assembled at short notice; where there is a significant power differential between people; or where there is a high level of conflict or people's views are very divided.

## Analyse and report on your data

To learn more about this, have a look at [How to analyse and report on qualitative information \(stories, focus groups and interviews\).](#)

## Be accountable

Thank your participants for their efforts and let them know how they can see a copy of any report produced based on their information. People appreciate the effort you make to send them copies or invite them to launches.

## Review your focus group

Did your focus group go well? Did you notice anything to improve for next time? Taking some time to reflect and record adjustments for next time will ensure your focus groups improve and provide the information you need.

## Referenced links

- [How to analyse and report on qualitative information](#)
- [Using focus groups in program development and evaluation](#)