

Advice for Running a Focus Group¹

Before you begin

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained leader. It is used to learn more about opinions on a designated topic, and then to guide future action. The group's composition and the group discussion should be carefully planned to create a nonthreatening environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest opinions. Since participants are actively encouraged to not only express their own opinions, but also respond to other members and questions posed by the leader, focus groups offer a depth, nuance, and variety to the discussion that would not be available through surveys. Additionally, because focus groups are structured and directed, but also expressive, they can yield a lot of information in a relatively short time. In short, focus groups are a good way to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions on a topic.

Recheck your goals. Ask:

- "Why do I want to conduct a focus group?"
- "Why am I doing this?"
- "What do I hope to learn?"

Find a good leader

This is not a casual matter: Your leader will determine the success of your group. What kind of leader do you want? Probably someone who:

- Has experience facilitating groups
- Knows something about the topic
- Will relate well to the focus group participants
- Will work together with you to give you the outcomes you want

Find a recorder

A small but important point, often neglected. You want to make sure people's ideas don't get lost. Someone should be writing down what is said, in the same way as taking minutes at a meeting.

Decide who should be invited

Ideally, those invited should be a *representative sample* of those whose opinions you are concerned about.

¹ Adapted in part from <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>

Decide about incentives

Should you offer an incentive for people to participate? Maybe not. In that case, why should people come? Possibly people will come just because they want to help. But some other incentive is sometimes called for. Money is one; sometimes focus group members get paid, even a small amount. You can also think about other possible incentives: food and; public recognition; something to take home; a later training opportunity.

Prepare your questions

Go in prepared. Write out in advance a list of topics and questions you want to ask. This will serve as your guide.

Conduct the group

A common sequence of events for many focus groups goes something like this: (The leader usually takes responsibility for carrying them out.)

- Thank people for coming.
- Review the purpose of the group, and the goals of the meeting. Set the stage.
- Go over the flow of the meeting -- how it will proceed, and how the members can contribute. Lay out the ground rules. Encourage open participation.
- Set the tone. This is important, because probably few of your members will have been in a focus group before.
- Ask an opening question. This could be a very general question ("What are your general thoughts about X?"), or something more specific. Both choices are justifiable; and both types of questions might be asked before the group ends.
- Make sure that all opinions on that question get a chance to be heard. How do you do this?

After the meeting: look at the data

If you have audio-recorded, make a transcript. If not, make a written summary from the group notes. But in any case, look closely at the information you have collected.

In some cases, you can devise and use a coding system to "score" the data and count the number of times a particular theme is expressed. Experience helps here. But whether you do this or not, try to have more than one person review the results independently. (Because even the best of us have our biases.) Then come together to compare your interpretations and conclusions.

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions seem true?