

Tips for Conducting a Focus Group

1. Identify goals. Create a one or two sentence statement of the goal of the focus group. Specifically, what do you want to know?

2. Recruit 6 to 12 participants. A group of more than 12 is unmanageable, and less than six makes it difficult to stimulate a useful discussion. Recruit two more people than you need (in case of no-shows). Keep in mind the composition of your group will affect the discussion and therefore the data that are generated (i.e., all male vs. mixed gender, all adolescents vs. adolescents and their parents). It is usually best to have a group of people that are alike in some way that is related to the topic of interest (i.e., all have experience attending your program). Incentives such as food, small stipends (e.g., \$20.00), or coupons often improve focus group attendance.

3. Create a focus group guide. The guide is not a verbal survey, but it lends some structure to the discussion and should be no longer than 12 questions. Using the metaphor of a funnel, each major topic should start with more broad questions (e.g., What did you think about your parenting skills program?), and get more specific (e.g., What were some barriers to implementing the parenting

program? How did a lack of transportation hinder the program?). The guide should include questions of how, why, under what condition, and should avoid leading questions or questions that only elicit a yes or no answer.

4. Find a moderator. The moderator encourages interaction among group members, ensures all people participate and that the discussion stays on topic, regulates any overly dominant group members, summarizes points made by group members, and is nonjudgmental.

5. Conduct the Focus Group or Groups. Focus groups tend to be about one and half hours (no more than two). Typically they start with introductions of each member and an overview of the topic and a statement of purpose of the group. In addition to the moderator, it is good to have a second person in the room to take notes.

6. Analyze the Focus Group Data. Typically the focus groups are audio taped and transcribed. The analysis of the transcript can be as simple as the number of times different themes appear in the transcript as a measure of importance of that theme. You can have themes that you are looking for and/or you can let themes emerge from the data.

More information about focus groups is available from the American Statistical Association on its web site, <http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf>. Appendix 7E contains a checklist on what should be covered in an introduction of a focus group and a worksheet on how to take notes during a focus group written by a consultant from the Department of Veteran Affairs.

Focus Group Project Team

Finding the right role for everyone

The project team, also referred to as the research team, is critical to the outcome of the focus group project! Successful focus groups are truly a team effort and according to focus group expert David Morgan, “any weak link in the chain can ruin the entire project.”

Moderators are often the most visible members of the focus group project. However, it is equally important to have qualified and trained Project Leaders, Recorders, Recruiters, Data Analysts, Reporters, and Logistics Managers. Getting the best results from your efforts requires a commitment and concerted effort from *all* members of the research team!

Everyone has a role to play and finding the right mix of people on the project team is sometimes tricky. Look at each team member’s strengths in order to discover what role would be the best fit in order to ensure they can make a maximum contribution to the research effort. It’s not to say that someone can’t try new roles in order to expand their skills, but having guidelines on what the responsibilities will entail can help make crucial team decisions.

Below is a list of the most common roles and responsibilities of a focus group project team. Using the definitions and associated tasks can help you create a dynamic and powerful research team!

MODERATOR:

Also referred to as a 'facilitator', the moderator is the person who actually "guides" the focus group discussions. The moderator role is deceptively simple! It is critical that this person be comfortable with groups, have superb listening and communication skills and have an understanding of group dynamics. The moderator's goal isn't to just get people talking, but to probe into responses to find out their motivations, challenging what is said at face value, and to uncover the "real" information that is hidden.

CO-MODERATER:

Will assist the moderator during the focus group sessions (capturing key phrases on flip charts, helping with any group techniques or exercises). They may sometimes facilitate parts of the focus group session entirely. Especially for new or inexperienced moderators, having a co-moderator can be helpful, and even necessary in case you need unexpected assistance during a session. The same skills are needed as listed in the moderator description.

RECORDER:

This is often the most under-appreciated responsibility on the team. Take warning: This is not a secretarial role to take "minutes" of the focus group session. Actually, a focus group recorder needs to be a trained member of the team who understands the principles and dynamics of focus group research. They should be able to recall and link previous comments, be alert to capturing non-verbal messages and the meaning behind what participants are saying. They should also be able to identify key quotes from participants that capture the essence of what is being said.

RECRUITER:

When too few people show up, or too many, your focus group can be a disaster! All the efforts in planning, training, and writing questions are wasted. Recruitment is a systematic process that requires strict timelines and knowledge of databases or potential sources for locating participants. Recruiters should be organized, have a gift for talking with others and be have a strong sense of perseverance. Recruitment can be hard work and is the number one reason focus groups fail!

DATA ANALYST:

Not everyone is good at analyzing large amounts of qualitative information and turning it into something meaningful. The analyst must have an open mind, be open to alternatives, and be flexible, organized, systematic and objective. That's a tall order to fill! Focus group analysis is complex and is much like detective work- looking for clues, trends and themes. The analyst should possess the ability to recognize patterns, segments and sets of data and be able to summarize large amounts of content into categories. Focus group analysis is dynamic, creative and absolutely systematic all at the same time!

LOGISTICS MANAGER:


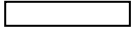
Sometimes teams recruit for help with the project logistics, mostly on the day of the focus group sessions. This person is responsible for setting up the room, getting the needed equipment and testing tape recorders, ensuring all needed tools are in place (flip charts, sign in sheets, name tags, refreshments). The logistics manager will usually greet the participants, help with signing them in, getting consent forms signed and putting together the "thank you gifts" for participants. This role is varied but requires someone who is extremely organized, efficient, and a last minute problem solver!

Note Taking: Recorder Format Suggestions

Note taking should be conducted in a way that ensures a complete record upon the conclusion of each focus group. The “field notes” should be comprehensive enough that in the event of a tape recorder malfunction, they can be used as the primary source of findings and participant information. The field notes are also useful for filling in missing or inaudible comments from participants due to taping background noise, or lost information from switching the tape from side A to B, or putting in a new cassette.

The moderator or assistant moderator should take notes during the session to help in recalling and linking comments, remembering points to be discussed later or to capture comments that need further explanation.

Developing and agreeing on a standard practice for recording notes is essential for a project team. Identify a scheme or coding system that all recorders can use. Some suggestions follow:

- ❑ **Sketch of seating pattern:** Sketch this on a separate sheet of paper so that it can be referenced during the note taking. Identify each participant using a coding system (participant #1,2,3 or participant A,B,C...), so that quotes, comments, etc. can be labeled and identified as needed.
- ❑ **Quotes:** Capture these word for word on the right side of page.
- ❑ **Paraphrased Quotes:** Capture key phrases word for word. Use ellipses (...) to indicate that words are missing. Quotes and paraphrases are the only information placed on the right side of the page.
- ❑ **Summary points or themes:** List these on the left side of the page.
- ❑ **Major Themes:** Place a star by these items (*).
- ❑ **Questions that occur to the recorder:** These questions might be asked later and are identified with a question mark (?) at the beginning and the end. These are placed on the left side of the notes.
- ❑ **Big Ideas that affect the study:** These thoughts and interpretations of the assistant moderator are circled and placed on the left side. 
- ❑ **Observations of body language, discussion climate, etc.:** These observations are placed on the left side, and a box is drawn around each observation. 

SAMPLE Template

Title of Focus Group Project	
Date of Focus Group	
Location of Focus Group	
Number of Participants	
Participant Group Demographics	
Moderator Name	
Assistant Moderator Name	
Additional Recorder Name	
Additional Recorder Name	

Response to Questions

Q1. When you first learned you would be doing your residency rotation at the VA hospital, what were your first thoughts or anticipations?

Brief Summary of Key Points	Memorable Quotes
Observations	

Moderator Debriefing Guidelines and Key Questions

Listed below are some key questions that should be asked during the moderator debriefing session. The moderator debriefing is the meeting held immediately following a focus group session with the project team and co-moderator, and is preferably taped so that it is included in the transcript.

Keep in mind that these questions do not necessarily have to be answered in order, just that the information is captured from each.

- ❑ What were your first impressions of the focus group?
- ❑ Go through the discussion guide and highlight key points and findings from each question. The recorders and co-moderator should verify these comments.
- ❑ What were the most important themes or ideas discussed?
- ❑ What are the major points that need to be included in the final report?
- ❑ What were the “memorable” quotes that captured the essence of the findings?
- ❑ Were there expected participant findings?
- ❑ Were there any unexpected participant findings?
- ❑ Are there findings from this group that need to be incorporated in following groups?
- ❑ What were common themes or findings based on any previous groups held?
- ❑ How did this group differ from any previous groups, in relation to key findings?
- ❑ Should we do anything differently for the next focus group?