



## Conducting Focus Groups

Focus groups can be used to learn more about a target health issue or a target audience. This guide outlines how to conduct focus groups and how to use the insights gathered from them.

### What are focus groups?

Focus groups bring together a small number of individuals to share their **experiences and viewpoints** surrounding a particular health topic. Individuals share anecdotes, respond to each other's ideas, and generate discussion about opportunities and concerns.

### What can insights from focus groups tell us?

Focus groups allow facilitators to access **points of view from patients, professionals, and families** affected that can be difficult to access in surveys or polls with fixed questions. Respondents can elaborate or explain their reactions. In addition to learning from several different individuals at one time, facilitators can learn from the interaction between respondents for deeper and more detailed discussion.

These comments can be used to understand more about the **health issue or audience**. They can also be used to **tailor materials** to be more culturally resonant (e.g., topics and language). Focus groups can also be used as an opportunity to share proposed health campaign messages or resources and **solicit feedback from target audience members**.

### Who should we include in our focus groups?

As a general rule, participants should feel safe when they are participating in a focus group. Groups of 6–8 respondents allow for discussion, while also allowing each respondent the opportunity to share their full experiences. It is best to over-recruit in case participants withdraw or do not end up attending.

### **Some considerations when selecting focus group participants:**

- Respondents ideally should be as **similar as possible** (e.g., same race, gender, and/or age, etc.) to feel comfortable disclosing their true experiences.
- Avoid respondents who know each other** to minimize discomfort with sharing experiences.
- Select **facilitators that align** with the demographic of the selected focus group participants.
- If possible, **conduct multiple focus groups** in order to gain perspectives of different groups or to examine patterns among similar groups.

## **How do we prepare for the conversation?**

Before hosting a focus group, it is important to **develop a moderator guide**. A moderator guide is the list and order of questions you would like to ask participants, which allows structure and assurance you will get all of the insight you desire from the session.

### **Some tips for developing questions:**

- Begin with easier, comfortable questions** before asking about sensitive topics.
- Ask general questions before specific ones.** Beginning more generally allows the conversation to flow more organically with “top of mind” responses, than specific ones that can direct the conversation too quickly.
- Avoid questions that ask for identifying information** (e.g., where someone lives, identifiable titles or roles, etc.).
- Use **open-ended questions** that probe a large variety of responses (e.g., what, how, where, etc.)
- Avoid “yes” or “no” questions** that do not allow for participants to elaborate.
- Avoid “Why?” questions.** Respondents may not know or know how to articulate motivations and these questions can be too presumptive.
- Ask about past experiences**, rather than the future. Respondents are more reliable reporting what has happened to them, than intended or hypothetical future behaviors.

- Vary the type of questions** to keep participants engaged (e.g., generate examples, ask for a list, fill in the blank, etc.)

Focus group evaluation leader Richard Kroeger has a helpful resource [here](#) that includes sample questions.

## How do we prepare for the focus group session?

Careful planning prior to the session can help make the day less stressful for both participants and facilitators, setting up success for the conversation.

### Before the session:

- Select **at least two facilitators** for the session that align with target audience:
  - The **moderator** should solely focus on monitoring verbal and nonverbal cues in the conversation to facilitate a safe, constructive environment for all participants. Requiring the moderator to take notes distracts from this process.
  - The **notetaker/recorder** ensures recording technology is working and takes notes throughout the session of topics discussed in the event technical issues with the recording arise or portions of the recording are indecipherable. The notetaker/recorder should also identify any notable quotes.
- Prepare **participant incentives**. Incentives provide compensation for the time participants spend sharing insights.
  - Incentives can include direct benefits to the participants such as money, food at the session, gifts, etc.
  - Barriers to participation (e.g., parking/transportation costs, childcare) could also be minimized as part of the incentives.
  - The value of participant incentives can range from \$50-\$100/hour per participant, with some commercial focus groups having higher compensation rates. In general, greater incentives are offered when sensitive or difficult to share topics are discussed or require participants who are more difficult to recruit. All participants should receive incentives.
- Partner with organizations or other stakeholders** to help recruit focus group participants. Working with other groups that are interested in learning from the insights can help reach target audience members more efficiently.
- Prepare an **easily accessible and comfortable space** for the session. Participants and the moderator should be in a circle to facilitate more open conversation, with the notetaker/recorder off to the side.

- Record the session (tape or audio).** Recording the session ensures that all thoughts expressed by participants are included in an analysis and also ensures accuracy of sentiments expressed.

### During the session:

- Open the session by explaining to participants **what they should expect**:
  - Develop a **consent form**. Consent forms allow participants to read the expectations and provide them the opportunity to withdraw if they feel uncomfortable. No participant should feel coerced into participating against their will.
  - Explain the purpose** of the focus group and where these insights may be used.
  - Establish **ground rules** for participating in the session. This can include asking that cell phones be turned off, conversation norms, etc. Suggestions can be found [here](#).
- Include a warm-up/ice breaker** to get individuals comfortable with each other before answering questions about the topic.
- Offer a **brief summary** of the answers before moving on to other questions to allow for final thoughts (e.g., “We discussed... is that an adequate summary?”)
- When closing the session, **revisit the purpose** and ask “Have we missed anything?” to **capture any closing thoughts** that might not have come up.

## How do we review insights from the focus group session?

Because focus groups can be more subjective than polls or surveys, analyzing focus group conversations in a systematic way allows us to strive for unbiased conclusions.

### Some ideal practices to consider:

- Transcribe the session.** When listening to a session (live or recorded), we may get swept up in a comment that we miss surrounding comments. Having a transcription allows us to carefully examine each part of the session and also pay close attention to recurring terms or phrases.
- Utilize more than one independent rater** who did not attend the session. Using raters that did not attend the session allows for an unbiased perspective of the transcript (i.e., not fixating on comments that they remember from the session). Having two raters review the transcript independently before comparing notes can also allow for alternate interpretations.
- Identify themes by question and then overall.** Examining themes by question can identify nuances and specific quotes for highlighting. Examining themes overall can help with constructing an overall “narrative” to the conversation.

- **Write a report “narrative”.** A report should highlight key themes with anonymous quotes to help illustrate those themes.

## Examples

- A series of twelve [focus groups](#) in Los Angeles County were used to develop a cervical cancer campaign targeting Latina women.
- A [focus group](#) of Grand County, Colorado residents was conducted to understand opportunities to improve the public health system.

## Sources and Additional Resources

*This guide was developed from insights from the sources below:*

Donovan, E. E., Miller, L. E., & Goldsmith, D. J. (2014). “Tell me about a time when...”: Studying health communication through in-depth interviews. In B. B. Whaley (Ed.), *Research methods in health communication: Principles and application* (pp. 21-40). Routledge.

Krueger, R. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage.

Krueger, R. A., Casey, M. A., Donner, J., Kirsch, S., & Maack, J. N. (2001). *Social analysis: selected tools and techniques*. Social Development Papers, The World Bank.

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