

# Conducting Focus Groups



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# Conducting Focus Groups

## **Focus Groups**

Facilitators & Participants

Preparation

Schedules & Scripts

# Focus Groups

- Qualitative research method
- Typically small (5–8 participants), **guided group conversations** with users, not-yet users, community representatives, or stakeholders designed for engagement and discussion among participants who share or represent a range of experiences, expertise or other criteria
  - face-to-face
  - video conference
- **Time intensive** (45–90 minutes for sessions, plus preparation, processing, analysis)
- Subject to **bias** (e.g., participants wanting to please or not offend facilitator, facilitator “leading” the participants)
- Subject to **participant inaccuracies** in retelling experiences/behavior (e.g., remembering processes or engagement differently than they occurred, peer pressure/influence of other participants, group dynamics)
- Opportunity for **participant engagement with each other**
- Opportunity for **follow up questions and clarification**, leads to deeper possibilities for understanding
- Opportunity to gather **anecdotal data and human stories**; powerful for storytelling.

# Applications



- Identify **users' key issues** of concern, attitudes, beliefs, feelings
- Test out **possible future scenarios** for services, resources, or systems
- Augment other assessment approaches thereby increasing detail or context
  - **Illuminate responses from broader surveys/questionnaires**
  - Gather feedback on **tentative conclusions** from other studies
- Engage users in **participatory design**

# Advantages



- Provide detailed responses and resulting understanding
- Surface agreements and disagreements
- Elicit “real world” contexts, responses
- Offer relatively fast feedback (longer depending on recording and analysis processes)
- Can be adapted to many audiences, contexts, questions

## Drawbacks

- **Difficult to coordinate**
- **Groupthink** may emerge
- Some participants may **dominate** or “**disappear**” in discussion
- Susceptible to **convenience sampling** or skewed groupings of participants
- **Trained facilitator useful** for best results
- Overwhelming data (recordings, transcripts) for analysis



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# Facilitators

- Facilitators should be properly trained in focus group techniques
  - Pleasant, receptive manner
  - Inspire confidence
  - Good listener
  - Helps participants feel comfortable
- Guide discussion
- Keep conversation to broad points
- Asks non-leading questions, refrain from body language that may influence responses
- Follows up with additional questions as the format allows
- Seeks to avoid and counteract any facilitator bias
- Ideally, does not “represent” the entity being explored in the focus group
- May be accompanied by a recorder or notetaker



# Attendees & Venues

## Attendees

- 5–8 Participants  
(recommendations vary)
- Moderator/facilitator
- Recorder
- Notetaker
- Another observer

## Venues

- In person
- Online (video conferencing)
- Recorded (or not)
- Transcribed (or not)
- “Private” (or not)

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# Recording



- Modes: audio, video, notes
- Requires consent (signed)
- Note taking can be augmented by pre-filled in materials, checklist, forms, with ample space to note departures.
- Purposes:
  - allowing facilitator to focus on participants
  - capturing verbal or non-verbal cues
  - transcribing discussion verbatim
  - validating notes
  - enabling multiple listeners to check reliability
  - decreasing likelihood of facilitator bias

# Structure

- **5–8 people** with desired common characteristics (10 max)
- Usually **45–90 minutes**
- Appoint both a facilitator and a note taker
- Record discussion
- Facilitate 5–6 prepared questions
- Ensure environment is suitable and comfortable
- Give clear instructions, explain purpose, and confirm consent to recording
- Ensure that all participate
- Close with a review, and thank participants
- Listen to what people say after close of session
- Check recording immediately
- Facilitator and note taker create summaries independently

# Preparation

- Prepare recruiting and consent forms in accordance with IRB requirements and informing participants about any risks they may encounter. Forms may be in print, online signature technology, or verbal (depending on IRB protocols).
- Ensure comfortable, accessible, safe spaces (check for barriers in digital and/or physical environments, e.g., time of day, technology required, cost of transportation/parking/wayfinding, security considerations).
- Instruct participants about any materials they should bring (e.g., screenshots of examples, writing utensils) or use (e.g., whiteboards) during the session.
- Ask participants in advance and provide accommodations that enable or facilitate their participation.
- Anticipate that some participants may not attend; consider scheduling more than you need.
- Remind participants of time and venue (scheduled conveniently) in multiple modes (e.g., email, text).

# Preparation

- Ensure prepared scripts, questions, consent forms, props, note taking materials/checklists, recording devices, etc. are ready in advance.
- Pilot questions and protocols extensively before the first “real” focus group; select pilot participants who are similar to the intended session. Check to be sure questions are clearly stated, jargon free, not leading, etc.
- If possible, use both an facilitator and a notetaker/observer. Notetakers/observers should not attempt to participate actively in the session but should be introduced to participants.
- Consider role and cost of transcription services or coding software.

# Cultural Competence in Focus Groups

Reflect on your process, start to finish. Have you:

- Met with your target audience to ensure your work is connected to issues relevant to them?
- Included diverse members in your research team including those that might identify with your participants?
- Considered the representativeness of your participant sample?
- Reflected on your planned focus group communication style?
- Considered the role of identity and power differences in your focus group plan?
- Engaged in full disclosure and transparency with your participants (including but not limited to IRB consent)?
- Considered risks to participants (including but not limited to privacy concerns)?
- Incorporated plans for reciprocity for the time and effort given by participants? For empowerment? How will involvement in the project benefit participants and those they represent?
- Engaged in sufficient cultural competence training and reflection to conduct the focus groups in a culturally competent manner and be aware of and avoid inclusion of researcher bias?

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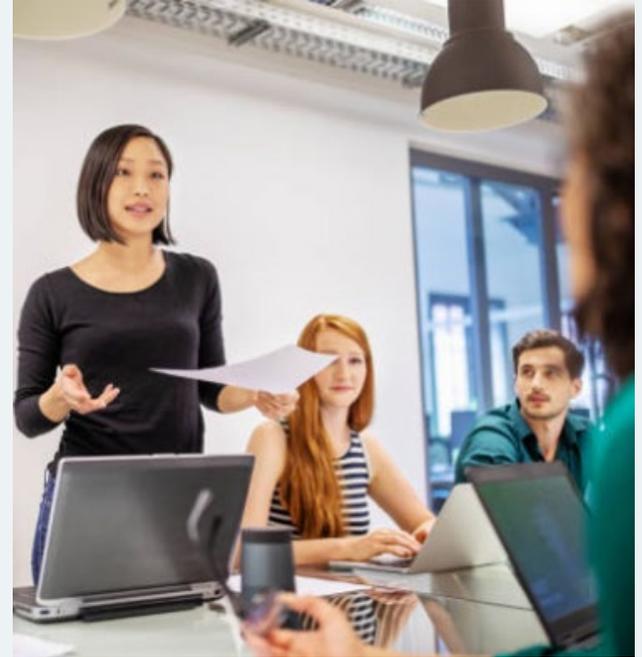
# General Schedule

- Begin with **confirmation of consent** to participate and record.
- Explain the **purpose** of the focus group. Share clear **instructions** and **timeline** for the focus group.
- Engage in focus group **questions**.
- Close with a **review** of the conversation, options for participant **follow up**, and an expression of **gratitude**.



# Scripts & Guides

- **Welcome** participants.
- Establish **ground rules**.
- Begin with **introductions** or a simple **icebreaker**.
- State your **focus** clearly, return to it often.
- Engage **discussion**. Limit the number of questions; 5–6 is good. Construct them in advance. Use open-ended phrasing. Start broad, then narrow and detailed. Consider the “arc” of questions (e.g., begin with behavior based questions (easier to respond to, move on to feelings/values questions).
- Anticipate likely follow up paths and construct **follow up questions** in advance that can be adapted to a variety of situations/responses.
- Close with a **summary** and express **appreciation**. Share anticipated **actions** and **timeframe**. Afterwards, check the recording, write summaries, and begin analysis.



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