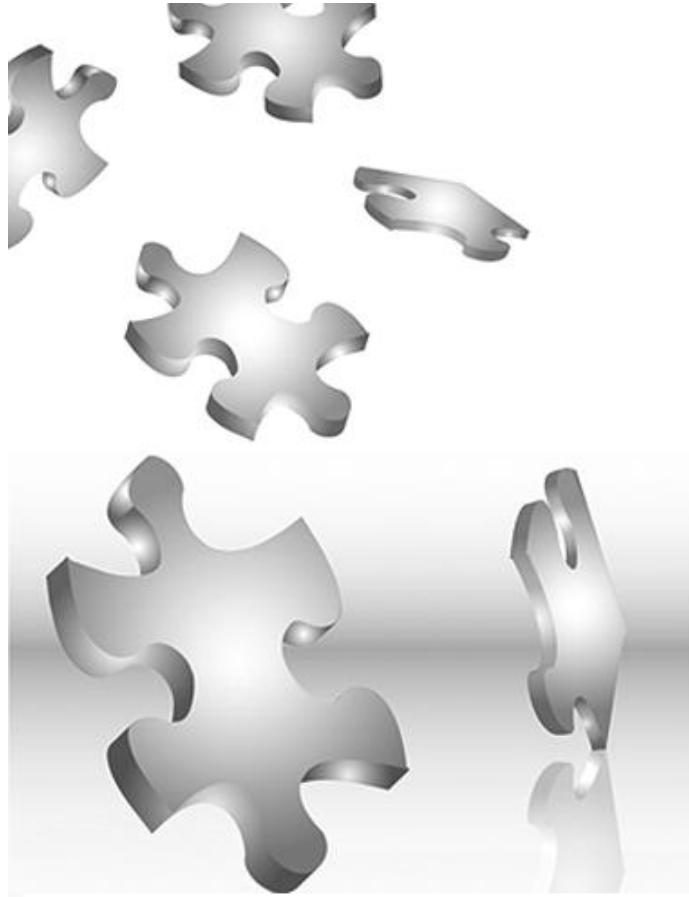




Center for Assessment, Planning & Accountability



Methodology Brief: Introduction to Focus Groups

Barry Nagle
Nichelle Williams

This methodology brief outlines a five-stage process for conducting focus groups and reporting on the results. The five stages are:

- Study Purpose
- Methodology
 - ❖ Conceptualization
 - ❖ Logistics
- Facilitation
 - ❖ Preparation
 - ❖ Pre-Session
 - ❖ Session
- Analysis
- Reporting

Using this five-stage process as a guide will contribute to the completion of an impactful focus group. This brief serves as an introduction to focus groups. Sources for more comprehensive information can be found in the resource section.

Why Focus Groups?

Focus groups provide insights into how people think and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. While a valuable research tool, **surveys** generally ask closed-ended questions that may limit the feedback that can be gained from a respondent. A method to gain more in-depth information to supplement surveys is **interviews**; conducting interviews, however, can be an expensive proposition that can exceed the available resources. Focus groups are group interviews that give the researcher the ability to capture deeper information more economically than individual interviews.

Economy is an important benefit but there are other benefits of focus groups when compared to interviews. Group interaction and non-verbal communication are primary benefits of focus groups. **Group interaction** between members of the target population during focus groups may encourage participants to make connections to various concepts through the discussions that may not occur during individual interviews. A skilled facilitator can encourage these group interactions to capture this data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied. **Non-verbal communication** is also data that can be captured in focus groups. Participants within a focus group may respond very differently to a topic. A topic related to gender equity, for example, may provoke intense discussion among female participants while male participants withdraw from the discussion. This type of interaction is **observation** data for analytical purposes.

Focus groups can be integrated into an overall study design or can occur individually when a specific topic is being explored. This methodology brief focuses only on focus group design and will not discuss its integration into an overall study.

Stage One: Study Purpose

As with any research study, the first stage in conducting a quality focus group is to define the study purpose. This is critical as it defines how all subsequent activities will proceed. Sample purposes for a focus group include:

- Exploration: *Finding out about an issue of importance from the target population*
- Program Development: *Asking members of the target population what types of activities they would enjoy*
- Systematic Research: *Collecting in-depth data on specific research questions*
- Evaluation: *Collecting in-depth data on specific evaluation questions to determine program success or progress*

Stage Two: Methodology

The methodology stage has two elements: 1) Conceptualization and 2) Logistics. The conceptualization of a focus group follows a process similar to a classic research study.

Conceptualization

Once the study purpose has been defined, the study **population** and **sample** have to be defined. The population represents the individuals that are to be analyzed. The sample is a subset of the population. Focus groups do **not** use probability or random samples. Focus groups generally utilize **convenience** sampling. The sample for a focus group has individuals with characteristics of the overall population and can contribute to helping the research gain a greater understanding of the topic.

A focus group is most effective with 7-12 participants. This is the optimal size to promote discussion and enable the facilitator to keep the group on task.

An optimal focus group has approximately five questions; in the development stage the researcher should brainstorm to develop a list of questions and then prioritize which questions are of most importance. The questions should be open-ended because the intent of the focus group is to promote discussion. Yes/No questions or questions that are too specific can limit discussion and decrease the value of a focus group.

A sample of an open-ended question would be “What do you think of this story?” This question promotes discussion about the story. A close-ended question such as “Did you like the story?” does not promote discussion.

After selecting the most important questions, order them into a logical flow and develop **prompts** for each question. A prompt is a question that can facilitate discussion if there is not a good response to the initial question. Also develop **probes**

which are questions that explore an issue more in depth. After finalizing the questions, review the questions to ensure that they are aligned with the study purpose. Sometimes in the methodology stage, a research team can become so enmeshed in developing questions and ideas that the final questions can lose their alignment with the study purpose. As a quality check, always take a step-back to ensure that the questions that are asked will inform on the study purpose. The final stage in question development is to **pilot test** the questions with individuals that have the same characteristics as your population. This will inform on whether any changes are needed in the questions.

Logistics

The logistics are often the most time-consuming element of preparing to conduct a focus group. Below is a suggested schedule for planning a focus group:

Task	Time before actual group
• Develop the Study Purpose	6-8 Weeks
• Identify the Participants	6-8 Weeks
• Develop Participant Contact List	6-8 Weeks
• Select the Facilitator	4-5 Weeks
• Question Development	4-5 Weeks
• Develop the Script	4-5 Weeks
• Pilot test questions and script. Revise as necessary	4 Weeks
• Obtain IRB Approval	Dependent on the Institution. If this takes more than a month, start the process earlier.
• Identify and reserve focus group site	4 Weeks
• Invite Participants	3-4 Weeks
• Verify Invitation to Participants by Phone	2 Weeks
• If there are multiple facilitators, conduct a training on the script to promote study reliability	2 Weeks
• Finalize Room Arrangements	1 Week
• Reminder Call to Participants	2 Days
• Organize all Needed Materials	2 Days

While starting planning 6-8 weeks prior to the actual focus group may seem like a long time, it is important for the research team to engage in a thoughtful process. This time span allows the researcher to make adjustments as needed.

When selecting participants, attend to the level of the participants; do not invite a supervisor to sit in the same group with his/her subordinates. If a supervisor or someone else who is in charge of the rest of the participants is invited to the group,

the group interaction will change and negatively impact the utility of the focus group results.

Selecting the facilitator is important. If no one on the research team is comfortable in front of groups or has the ability to encourage group interaction, use an external person that has experience in facilitating groups. A good facilitator has the ability to guide discussion and allow the participants to express their views on the topic. A poor facilitator dominates the discussion and does not encourage participation or allows the conversation to lose focus.

The script is a guide for the facilitator to explain to individuals the purpose of the group, review the focus group rules (discussed later in this brief), and other information that may be important to provide to the participants. The script helps to support the reliability of the focus groups if more than one is conducted. The script will help to ensure that all groups are conducted in the same way. A script template is included at the end of this document.

If possible, visit the focus group location to ensure that the room is comfortable and that the seats can be arranged. Although room reservation can seem like a minor issue, these are the types of details that must be attended to for a successful focus group.

It is also important to organize the materials early. It can impact focus group discussion if the facilitator is anxious because materials are missing or purchased at the last minute. If the facilitator is anxious, this may make the participants uncomfortable and limit discussion.

The materials that you will need for focus groups are:

- Notepads and Pencils
- Flip Charts or Easel Paper
- Focus Group Script
- Tape Recorder
 - ❖ Remember to ask if anyone minds being taped. If anyone says yes, do not tape the session
- List of Participants
- Sign-in Sheet
- **Consent Forms**
 - ❖ This is critical! It is good research practice and should be part of your IRB application
- Markers
 - ❖ Test the markers on the paper to ensure that they do not bleed through the paper and damage the wall
- Tape
 - ❖ Ensure that the tape can stick on the wall! Otherwise, use an easel
- Name Tags

- Clock
 - ❖ Start on-time and end on-time.
- Refreshments
 - ❖ Always help make people feel comfortable

Conceptualizing the focus group and managing the logistics will prepare the focus group for Stage Three.

Stage Three: Facilitation

The general components of the facilitation stage are preparation, pre-session, and the session itself. There are certain factors to acknowledge for each component that will contribute to conducting a successful focus group.

Preparation

With the logistics completed, the research team can prepare for the focus group. Wherever possible, there should be a focus group **team**. The team should have at least two people. One person is the facilitator and the other is the note taker. It is important to have a note taker to record the focus group feedback. It can negatively impact the discussion if the facilitator is stopping to write things down. A focus group is a conversation and this should not be impeded by someone stopping to take notes.

Preparation involves the facilitator committing the questions to memory. The script can be used for verification but the facilitator needs to keep the conversation flowing and reading questions can detract from the conversation.

Pre-Session

The time before the focus group starts is an important opportunity to become familiar with the group dynamics. For example, the facilitator can note who may be shy or who sits in the back of the room. Also engage in small-talk prior to the session being careful to avoid the session topics. This can help the participants to feel more comfortable around the facilitator and make engaging the group an easier process.

Do not make it obvious where the facilitator will be standing during the session. This will give the facilitator freedom to go where he/she feels would be most appropriate based on what is observed during the pre-session. If, for example, the facilitator observes a group of individuals that group their chairs in the back of the room and do not engage in conversation with others, the facilitator can make that the area where introductions are made and ask the participants to re-group the chairs around him/her.

Use the pre-session as an opportunity to begin to understand the group and what will help the focus group be successful.

Facilitation

After the pre-session, the facilitator can proceed through the script by first opening the session. To open the session, request that the participants introduce themselves. Avoid sequential introductions as this will set the stage for participants to talk in order instead of it being more of a conversation. If the session is being recorded, ask again if anyone objects to being recorded. If anyone says yes, do not record. Also remind participants that all information is confidential. This will help make individuals feel more comfortable about participating if they know that what they say will stay in the room. Do not inform people that their comments are confidential if it is not true.

After opening the session, proceed through the questions. At the end of the discussion, close the session using the text from the script.

The questions are important but maintain flexibility. If an issue seems critical to the participants and it aligns with the study purpose, explore it more in depth.

Facilitation Tips

Preparation is the most important element to a successful focus group; there are, however, tips that can be utilized to help make the focus group more successful.

- *Pause: When someone says something, wait approximately five seconds to see if that person has more to say or if another participant wants to add feedback. Give participants the opportunity to finish their thoughts.*
- *Probe: If something is important to explore, ask questions like “Can you tell me more about that?” or “Can you give me an example?”*
- *Avoid head nods or responses like “yes,” “I agree,” “OK”: The facilitator is there to get the feedback from the participants. These kinds of responses are messages to the group on what is acceptable to say and can limit the discoveries that are made during the group.*
- *Reflect: When a topic appears complete, review the notes taken to verify that important information was captured. If the note taker is displaying the notes on an easel pad, the facilitator can use this as a guide with the group.*

Utilize non-verbal communication:

- If someone has something to say, acknowledge them with a hand signal to let him/her know that you will give them an opportunity to contribute.
- If someone interrupts when someone else is speaking, signal them to wait and that they will be given an opportunity to speak.
- Eye contact is important. Establish eye contact with those that are speaking but also with those that are not participating to encourage their engagement in the conversation.

Attend to personality types:

- *Experts: These are individuals that generally know more about the topic than anyone else in the room. They either attempt to dominate discussion or do not participate because of their extensive knowledge. Whichever applies, remind them on the value of getting everyone's input*
- *Dominant Talkers: Look for these individuals in the "small talk" at the beginning. If they are dominating the discussion, use non-verbal communication or draw attention away from them by moving to the opposite side of the room and drawing eye contact towards you from the other participants (This is subtle!!)*
- *Shy Participants: Use eye-contact and statements such as "I don't want to leave you out of the conversation, what do you think."*
- *Ramblers: Use eye-contact and body language. Remind them that it is important to get everyone's input. Also use guiding statements such as "What is specific thing you are trying to say" or statements such as "We need to keep the group moving but can you tell me more about that after the group?"*

Focus Group Rules

Stating some simple rules at the beginning of the focus group can be helpful in successful facilitation of the group. Rules you may consider include:

- *One Person Talking at a Time: Inform the group that in order to keep notes, it is important that only one person at a time speaks. Ask the participants to signal you if they have something to say.*
- *Cell Phones Off!: Ask people to turn off their connections to the outside world so they can focus on the topic!*
- *Confidentiality!: Inform the participants that everything they say will be kept in the room and that no one will be able to link statements to individuals. Only say this if this is true! If anyone other than the research team will hear or view focus group tapes, you have an ethical obligation to inform the participants.*
- *TIP: Inform participants in the beginning that if you interrupt them, you are not being rude. Say that you are just trying to ensure that everyone can participate and that the group stays on task.*

Stage Four: Analysis

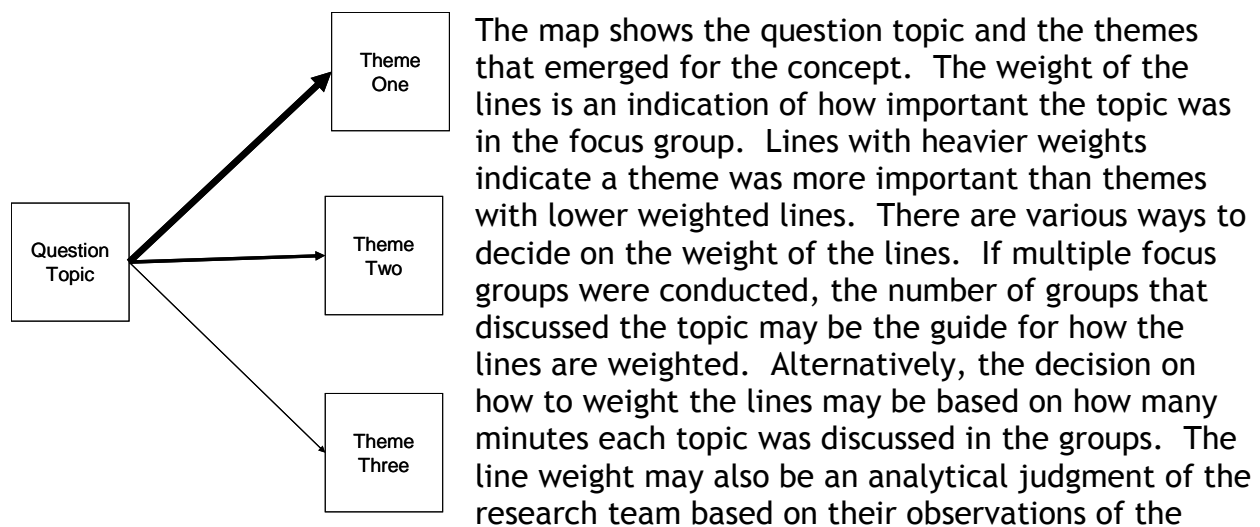
The analytical stage coalesces the focus group discussion into a manageable form for report development. Analysis should begin immediately after focus group closure. Comprehensive note taking and summarization of the discussion with the participants during the focus group session will facilitate more efficient analysis.

For each focus group question, summarize the "big ideas" or "themes" that were discussed. If the moderator and note taker were effective, these themes may have

emerged with the discussion. For each question, include observations such as body language, tone, and opinion differences. This process facilitates a deeper understanding on the study topic.

There may have been discussion points that did not match with the questions that were designed in the conceptualization stage. Be certain to capture these in the analytical stage as these topics can contribute to a greater understanding of the participants and what is being studied.

Data reduction is the key to the analytical stage; summarize a one to two hour discussion into manageable concepts that will facilitate report development. One method to do this is to create a **concept map**. An example of a concept map is below.



The map shows the question topic and the themes that emerged for the concept. The weight of the lines is an indication of how important the topic was in the focus group. Lines with heavier weights indicate a theme was more important than themes with lower weighted lines. There are various ways to decide on the weight of the lines. If multiple focus groups were conducted, the number of groups that discussed the topic may be the guide for how the lines are weighted. Alternatively, the decision on how to weight the lines may be based on how many minutes each topic was discussed in the groups. The line weight may also be an analytical judgment of the research team based on their observations of the discussion and how the important the topic was to the participants. Whatever data summarization method is utilized, it needs to be explained to the reader.

A concept map is an example of how focus group data can be summarized. The decision on how to summarize the data is a decision for the research team.

Stage Five: Reporting

The reporting stage ties all of the previous stages together into a coherent whole. The research team has various decisions to make in this stage with the most important being that the **audience** that the report is being written for is attended to. Other factors that must be attended to are listed below

- Decide if report will be in narrative style or bulleted style: *If the audience has limited time and will not read a full report, summarize the critical elements in a bulleted style. The important element is that the information is presented in a way that communicates with the audience and will be utilized.*

- Decide on sequence (question by question or by theme): *A question by question presentation of the results can present a clear idea of the important elements of the discussion. Generating themes for the entire discussion can present a more integrated view of the overall topic being discussed.*
- Participant Information: *Include in the report a summary of the focus group participants (e.g. Number of Women and Men, Student Level, etc.)*
- Utilize quotes from focus groups to emphasize points: *A participant or group of participants may summarize themes in a interesting way that will communicate with the audience in an effective way.*
- Summarize how focus group results align with the focus group purpose: *This may seem like a common sense element of reporting but it is a critical quality check to perform when reporting on focus group results. Summarize how the discussion developed the deeper understanding of the focus group topic.*

Summary

Focus groups are valuable research tools and can capture information that will help to better tell the story on the study topic. This methodology brief presents the stages needed to conduct an effective focus group. Focus groups are an important element for researchers to have in their methodological tool box. For additional information, consult the references listed in the resources section.

Please direct any questions that you may have to CAPA@uncfsp.org

Resources

Below are some resources that can provide more comprehensive information on conducting focus groups:

1. The Handbook for Focus Group Research by Thomas L. Greenbaum (Author). Second Edition
2. The Focus Group Guidebook (Focus Group Kit) by David L. Morgan.
3. Focus Groups as Qualitative Research (Qualitative Research Methods) by David L. Morgan. Second Edition
4. Focus Groups: Theory and Practice (Applied Social Research Methods) by David W. Stewart (Author), Prem N. Shamdasani (Author), Dennis W. Rook (Author). Second Edition

Consent Form Template

Focus Group Purpose: Enter Focus Group Purpose

I agree to take part in the PROJECT NAME research project specified above. I have read and understand the study purpose as described. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

1. I agree to be involved in a focus group
2. I agree to allowing the focus group to be audio-taped

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.

I understand that any data that the researcher extracts from the focus group for use in reports or published findings will not, under any circumstances, contain names or identifying characteristics.

Participant's name:

Signature:

Date:

Script Template

Opening (10 Minutes):

“Hello. My name is INTRODUCE YOURSELF. Today we would like to have a conversation with you about TOPIC DESCRIPTION. What we are trying to accomplish before we leave here today is to get a better understanding of PURPOSE OF THE FOCUS GROUP. Are there any questions?”

Respond to participant questions.

“Let's go over some rules. First, let's all turn off our cell phones so we are not interrupted. So we can keep track of what people are saying, remember that we have one person talking at a time. Please do not interrupt someone when they are talking. Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely confidential. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other focus groups we are giving. One of my jobs today as the moderator is to make sure we discuss all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I'm not being rude; I'm just making sure everyone has a chance to talk and that we discuss all of the issues.

“Just to get us started, let’s have everyone tell us your name, AND OTHER INFORMATION YOU MAY BE INTERESTED IN. (*Point to someone to start; randomly select people to demonstrate that people do not talk in sequence*).

“Let’s begin.”

Questions 1-3 (X minutes)

1. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level
2. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level
3. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level

Questions 4 (X minutes)

4. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level

Question 5 (X minutes)

5. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level

Question 6 (If time allows, X minutes)

6. Question
Prompt: Question to promote further question
Probe: Question to examine an issue at a deeper level

Closure (X minutes)

“Are there are final questions? (*Respond to questions*) Thank you for participating in focus group today. We are excited to learn about what you think.