


## Focus Group Overview

This guide provides guidance on focus groups and how to conduct effective ones.

### What is a focus group?

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique that collects information through facilitated group interactions. They can provide valuable information, digging into what people are thinking, feeling, or their motivations for action. Focus groups can be used alone or combined with other methods (e.g., surveys, interviews) and can produce useful data in a shorter period of time.

Participation and discussion are key for effective focus groups, so it's important to create an open and engaging environment (ensuring confidentiality for discussion and anonymity in reporting can help). Participants are usually not familiar with one another, but may share similarities like demographic attributes, geographic region, or some relationship to the research topic, such as worker voice.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Can be done over a shorter time period</li><li>- More cost-effective</li><li>- Can capture a range of perceptions</li><li>- Can be done in person or virtually</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- May go off topic</li><li>- Not designed to build consensus or decide a course of action</li><li>- Skillful facilitation needed</li><li>- More limited scope of data collected</li></ul>
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### When to use a focus group?

Focus groups can be utilized at multiple points across a project or program/service. However, the information gathered will differ depending on when a focus group is deployed.

- Before design or implementation of a program/service to identify needs and expectations.
- Gather feedback or measure satisfaction on an existing program/service.
- At the conclusion of a program/service to learn what worked and what did not.
- Survey complement: before a survey to determine questions / direction or after a survey to expand or confirm information from survey.

*Content adapted from "Qualitative Methods: Focus Group Module" by Michelle Wilson*

## What is the role of the facilitator?

Facilitators are critical to creating an open and welcoming environment. They navigate and steer conversations away from undesirable behavior and help participants stay on task. Facilitators ensure all participants have a chance to share and encourage them to express true feelings. If possible, considering hiring a professional facilitator.

A facilitator may have the following responsibilities during a focus group:

- Welcome participants
- Review the purpose, topic to discuss, ground rules
- Establish consent for collection or recording of information
- Inform participants of the confidential discussion
- Monitor time
- Encourage discussion and ensure all participants have a chance to talk

Learn more about the role of a facilitator and strong facilitation [here](#).

## What are the steps for planning a focus group?

1. **Determine your objectives and create a brief question guide.** These few questions should be relevant to all participants and easy to understand. You may also consider creating a screener (short survey) to ensure ideal participation.
2. **Prepare a guide for the facilitator** that includes relevant logistics and lays out topics, concerns, or any possible questions to explore.
  - a. *Pro-tip:* Don't forget to test your guides to ensure all can understand.
3. **Select the participant criteria.** This should be done before inviting participants and is important to consider potential group synergy and power dynamics. Criteria might include job status, gender, age, previous participation, etc.
4. **Plan for incentives.** Incentives help ensure participation in research studies and thank participants for their time. They should be appropriate for all participants and administered consistently. Consider something like a virtual gift card or donation to an organization.
5. **Select and train a facilitator.** Depending on the topic, it may be beneficial for a facilitator to have some cultural awareness, characteristics, or experience similar to participants. Facilitators should not be considered group members, nor should they show bias or preference. Ensure there is time to train the facilitator.
6. **Decide on a location and time.** Sessions are usually 60-90 minutes long, with additional time for arrival/welcoming. Consider locations and times that are convenient and comfortable for all participants (e.g., cultural or social respects). If in person, ensure you have appropriate contact numbers for location staff or participants in case of last-minute changes.
7. **Invite participants.** Multiple channels can be used to recruit participants (email, text, social media, etc.). Ensure there is plenty of time before the session (maybe

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3 weeks) and invite a few extra participants as fall-off is common. Consider using the language “discussion” in your communication, as “focus group” can be intimidating. Include relevant logistic information in your messaging and incentives. Be transparent and note this is a volunteer activity, and that information collected will be confidential. Send out reminders one week and 24-hours in advance of the session.

- a. *Pro-tip:* Consider refreshments if you’re in person and ask about any dietary restrictions.
8. **Arrive at the location early.** Facilitator and their support should arrive at the location early to set up, log-in, and test any electronic equipment. Consider limiting your organization staff as that can lead to a less open environment for participants. Consider adding signs or having greeters at the door.

### What happens after a focus group?

1. **Thank participants.** After the focus group, be sure to thank participants for their time and participation and remind them of the group confidentiality. Share how the information collected will be used and distribute the incentive, any additional refreshments.
2. **Debrief with facilitators.** The facilitator and support will debrief the conversation and summarize the high-level findings and themes. They should note any changes in the question sequence, participant body language or behavior, and any initial impressions.
3. **Mange materials and data.** Focus group materials Keep all materials, notes, and documents from the focus group together. Ensure they are labelled accurately and consistently. This information should remain confidential.
4. **Analyze results.** The level of analysis will depend on the purpose of the focus group session. Compilation of themes, cross-group comparisons, and summaries are generally sufficient as applicable. Consider adding participant quotes (anonymized) for additional context.