

A GUIDE TO CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS



ILLINOIS CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION AUTHORITY

CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

JESSICA REICHERT, MANAGER

JACQUELYN GILBREATH, RESEARCH ANALYST

MICHELLE KERZ, RESEARCH INTERN

Abstract: A focus group is a qualitative research method for collecting information through group discussions. Focus group planning includes determining roles, recruiting participants, and preparing to facilitate discussions. This article is a guide to successful and efficient focus group execution, analysis, and reporting. Ultimately, focus group findings can offer insights on a topic and can help guide and improve policies, practices, and programs.

Introduction



Conducting a focus group is a qualitative research method for collecting information through group discussions. Focus groups must balance the goals of those conducting them with the participants' interests.¹ Those executing the focus groups pick the *focus* and guide the conversation, but the *group* generates the data through its discussion. Organizations can use focus groups to answer questions of interest to guide and improve their operations or work. Focus group information can gather feedback on, and offer a nuanced understanding of, almost any topic—from social issues to consumer products. Information that is gleaned can help improve efficiency and effectiveness by guiding agency or program policies and operations.

Some may choose focus groups over other research methods (e.g., surveys, interviews) because they emphasize group dynamics, which can give participants a feeling cohesion and safety in sharing their views.² The social nature of focus groups creates an environment for gathering insights on problems and solutions with opportunities for spontaneous and unexpected responses from participants.³ Using open-ended questions results in more detailed and nuanced responses.⁴ In addition, focus groups can be economical and efficient as they allow researchers to gather information from a larger number of participants at once.⁵

Figure 1 illustrates common myths in comparison to the reality of focus groups.⁶ Ultimately, focus groups can be an effective way for any group to learn about a topic, but they do require planning and time.

Figure 1

Focus Groups: Myths vs. Reality

 Myths	Reality 
<p>Focus groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Require special facilities.•Are not suitable for sensitive topics.•Require professional moderators.•Must be validated by other methods.•Must consist of strangers.•Always low cost and quick.•Produce conformity.	<p>Focus groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Can be held in any private room, in a comfortable setting.•Use moderators who know the focus group population and more familiar with their issues.•Can yield rich information.•May be hard to avoid having persons who do not know each other.•Require planning and time investment.•Can uncover variety of opinions, feelings, and ideas.

Note. Adapted from Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus group guidebook*. SAGE Publications.

Before a focus group is held, the following should be done in preparation:

- Assign roles of those running the focus group.
- Select and recruit participants.
- Determine logistics (e.g., scheduling, location, materials).
- Develop questions to ask the group.
- Arrange for recording and collecting field notes.
- Plan information collection and results sharing.⁷

Roles in Conducting Focus Groups

The term research team is used broadly in this article, as those who conduct focus groups do not need to be academics or professional researchers. The team may include a moderator, an assistant moderator or note taker, relevant organization staff, and vested community members.

To begin planning, the team should discuss the following questions:

- Why is the focus group being conducted?
- What is the problem to address and purpose?
- What types of information are important?
- Who wants the information?
- How will the information be used?⁸

The team should come to an agreement on the purpose of the focus group and how the results will be used. They also should identify potential barriers to executing a successful focus group and how to overcome those barriers.

Moderator Role

The role of the moderator (sometimes referred to as the facilitator) is to guide the discussion of the focus group. Moderators are important because they ask questions, engage participants, keep the group moving, and acknowledge responses.⁹ Good moderators listen without participating in the discussion, while readying for the next question and keeping the group on track.¹⁰

Selecting a Moderator. When choosing a moderator, the research team should consider gender, language, race, age, socioeconomic characteristics, and technical knowledge of the individual.¹¹ The moderator should be representative of focus group participant demographics to avoid any perceived power differential between moderator and participants.¹²

Moderators should have strong facilitating skills including the ability to:

- **Build rapport** so that participants feel comfortable.
- **Reflect** on what has been discussed.
- **Probe** or ask follow-up questions for clarity or further information.
- **Use silence** as a way to let participants think and then share to fill the silence.
- **Check in** to see how people are feeling and when it is time to move on.
- **Remain neutral** in their spoken and body language, regardless of what is discussed that may be private, sensitive, or surprising.¹³

While leading and listening, a moderator should keep various questions in mind, including:

- What else do I need to ask to understand?
- Am I hearing everything I need to know to understand the problem and answer research questions?
 - Should I ask another question?
- How much time do I have left?
 - Will I be able to cover everything?
- What does all this mean anyway?
 - What am I learning about feelings, beliefs, behavior?
 - What ideas does this suggest about solving the problem?¹⁴

Moderators should engage participants and manage those who talk too much or too little. Tactics can be employed to engage participants, such as politely asking those who are talkative to give others a chance to speak. Another tactic is making eye contact or calling on those who have not spoken.¹⁵ In addition, moderators must always be aware of the time available and make efforts to keep the group on track.¹⁶ Figure 2 highlights qualities of a good moderator.

Figure 2

Qualities of a Good Moderator

Unbiased	Able to stimulate interaction without bias.
Safe	Creates and maintains a safe environment.
Listens	Practices good listening habits.
Structured	Provides structure for group discussions.
Fearless	Questions participants to explain their thinking.
Proactive	Is not reactive in groups and plans ahead.
Flexible	Is not too rigid to allow the flow of conversations.
Connects	Can relate to participants in the group.
Timely	Will hold the group accountable to the clock.
Social	Has high level of social intelligence.

Note. Adapted from Pruitt, B. (2021). *How to be a good facilitator: Top 10 qualities of the best facilitators*. Rhythm Systems. <https://www.rhythmsystems.com/blog/top-10-qualities-of-a-good-planning-facilitator>

The moderator's role is a juggling act that can be mentally exhausting. Therefore, it is recommended to keep focus groups between one to two hours. In addition, moderators should not moderate more than two focus groups in a day.¹⁷

Facilitating Techniques. Moderators may use a variety of facilitating techniques and activities. These techniques can be used when leading any group discussion, not just focus groups. Facilitating techniques may include:

- **Nominal:** Ask all participants to provide a response, selecting individuals as needed.
- **Laddering:** Ask follow-up questions of individuals to dig deeper.
- **Probe:** Pose follow-up questions based on participant responses.
- **Vote:** Ask participants to vote on something of importance.
- **Survey:** Ask for more information from participants and allow each person a chance to answer.
- **Index cards:** Allow each participant to jot down how they feel about something.¹⁸

Assistant Moderator Role

The assistant moderator's main responsibility is to take notes (also referred to as "note taker"). Assistant moderators also may help prepare the focus group rooms by setting up audio recorders, preparing refreshments, and arranging chairs. They welcome participants as they arrive and manage participants who arrive late. Finally, they participate in a focus group debrief with the moderator to share and compare thoughts after the session.¹⁹

Note-taking. Clear, detailed notes are important to supplement audio recordings for data analysis.²⁰ The assistant moderator may choose to use an observation protocol to take notes (Figure 3).²¹ Field observations should include descriptive and reflective notes.²²

- *Descriptive notes* answer the what, who, when, and how questions, including who said what, pertinent quotes, and key points.²³
- *Reflective notes* capture the note taker's thoughts, ideas, questions, and inferences.²⁴ For example, notes on participation levels and non-verbal activity, such as body language and eye contact between participants.²⁵

The assistant moderator should record information about participants. To gather demographics, the assistant moderator can collect information through brief surveys as they enter the room or from their own observations.

Figure 3

Field Observation Protocol Example

Date:	Start Time:
Location:	End Time:
Person taking notes:	
Moderator:	
Participants:	
Documents/handouts:	
Notes:	
Descriptive notes: Description of participants, activities, interactions, discussion, events	
Reflective notes: Questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, interpretations/inferences	

Note. Adapted from Johnson, L. R. (2016). *Community-based qualitative research: Approaches for education and the social sciences*. SAGE publications.

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802809>

Community Role

For some focus groups related to community issues or initiatives, community members can have an important role. Community members can assist with the following:

- Recruiting participants and sharing results.
- Developing questions including weighing in on wording choices.
- Suggesting the location.
- Serving as moderators with training and guidance.²⁶

Community members are often credible messengers and may be able to reach participants of interest that staff cannot.²⁷ Such inclusion builds community capacity and fosters engagement in the research.²⁸ One study that included training community members as focus group moderators found that community members brought more cultural sensitivity to groups and that participants had a better understanding of what the moderator was asking them. These settings also helped the research team obtain more in-depth answers.²⁹

Focus Group Participants

Focus groups should be limited to five to eight participants.³⁰ Smaller groups allow each participant to share insights; large groups can be difficult to control. Researchers also should consider over-recruiting participants to adjust for potential no-shows.³¹

Recruiting Participants

When deciding on which participants to recruit and invite, the research team should consider those with insights on the topic, varying perspectives and demographics, and different roles.³² The research team should be mindful of how they select people with different levels of expertise or power to ensure every participant will be comfortable sharing in the setting.³³ For example, employees who are in a group with their supervisors may feel uneasy answering certain questions. However, the research team may seek some similarities in occupations, ages, or genders if it makes sense for the focus group, while being open to differences to obtain all viewpoints.³⁴ For example, if the focus group specifically wants to hear from women police officers.

There may be barriers to recruiting participants for focus groups such as limited time, mistrust, personal illness.³⁵ One way to improve recruitment is for the research team to collaborate with community members and make social contact.³⁶ The research team can ask screening questions to see if individuals meet their criteria, for example, persons living in a certain community or who used a certain program in the past six months.³⁷ However, researchers want to avoid selection bias or the selective recruitment of certain types of participants, such as those who would view a program favorably. Selection bias can reduce representativeness of participants and the generalizability of focus group findings.³⁸ Therefore, the research team may choose to not select only those very vocal and engaged in the focus group topics.³⁹ One option is for the team to randomly select from a pool of potential participants.⁴⁰ Another way to improve retention is to offer reasonable incentives, such as cash or gift cards to stores, which serve to reimburse and thank them for their contribution to the research.⁴¹

Retaining Participants

Once recruited, the research team wants to make sure participants actually show up to the focus group. To encourage retention, the research team can start by sending personal invitations to participants one month in advance of the focus group.⁴² An invitation through a phone call or email that is personalized, warm, and sincere tends to be more effective than a form letter.⁴³ The invitation must explain the benefit of the focus group and how the information will be used.⁴⁴ The day before the focus group, reminder phone calls, emails, and texts should be sent out to participants.⁴⁵ Again, reasonable incentives, such as gift cards, can help with retention.

Planning a Focus Group

Venue

The focus group should be scheduled at a time and located in a space that is convenient for participants.⁴⁶ In-person focus groups should take place in a comfortable, private, and safe environment with access to parking, transportation, and childcare, if needed.⁴⁷ To assist with childcare, the research team may provide coloring books, crayons, or toys for young children to stay occupied during the focus group.⁴⁸

Virtual focus group technology may have benefits such as:

- Allow participants to participate without the inconvenience of traveling to one location.
- Tend to produce viewpoints of all participants, rather than the most verbal participants as in in-person groups.⁴⁹
- Allow for ease in recording and create transcripts.⁵⁰

If holding a virtual focus group, the moderator should limit noise and other distractions and conduct the meeting from a well-lit room.⁵¹ A potential downside to virtual focus groups, is that research has found participants are more silent, do not give as detailed answers, and show more agreement with others than in-person groups.⁵² The moderator may need to ask participants to elaborate on their responses, as well as manage participants to allow for turns in speaking to capture each person's contributions.⁵³ Most virtual platforms allow the use of features such as the chat box and polls that can aid in capturing additional information.⁵⁴

Materials

The assistant moderator will need an audio recorder and a pen and paper for note-taking during the focus group.⁵⁵ Additional materials needed may include a flip chart, post-it notes, index cards, surveys, and name tags/tents.⁵⁶ The moderator and assistant moderator should test audio recorders and any other required technology prior to the participants' arrival.⁵⁷ The research team should also set up refreshments and bring other incentives, such as gift cards.

Moderator Script

The moderator should prepare a script to guide the start of the focus group.⁵⁸ The script should include:

- A welcome to the focus group and introduction to moderator and assistant moderator.
- Brief introduction to participants, such as first names.
- The purpose of the focus group and how information collected will be used.
- An explanation of the agenda and duration of the focus group.
- Notification that the meeting is being recorded.
- The importance of participation throughout the discussion.
- A reminder to silence and put away cell phones.
- Information on refreshments, if applicable, and restroom locations.⁵⁹

Focus Group Questions

Developing Questions

Focus group questions should be asked in a relaxed and conversational way.⁶⁰ Word choice is important for clarity and understanding.⁶¹ In addition, questions should be sequential from general to specific and flow efficiently from one to another.⁶² The research team may test their questions and request feedback prior to asking them in the focus group.⁶³

Question Types

Questions types may vary and include the following:⁶⁴

- **Opening questions.** These questions answered by everyone to help them feel comfortable speaking.⁶⁵ Questions should not reveal status or power.⁶⁶ For example, “Tell us your first name and one thing you like doing.”⁶⁷
- **Introductory questions.** Introductory questions are used to get the participants thinking about their connection to the topic.⁶⁸ For example, “When did you first encounter the agency?”
- **Transitional questions.** Transitional questions encourage participants to get into more depth on the topic.⁶⁹
- **Key questions.** These are used to drive the study.⁷⁰ Moderators typically ask between two and five key questions per focus group ranging from general to specific.⁷¹
- **Ending questions.** Ending questions help summarize the discussion, such as “So, I have heard...” or “Have we missed anything?”⁷²

Data Analysis

Focus groups may reveal data in the forms of audio-recordings, transcripts, and field notes. The creation of written transcripts from recordings can be very time consuming and costly, but captures details of everything said during the focus group needed to complete a thorough analysis. Due to the qualitative nature of focus group data, researchers will organize the information gathered into themes or topics that emerged.⁷³ In addition, direct quotes from participants can illustrate findings.⁷⁴ Focus group findings can inform recommendations to improve policy or practice.⁷⁵ A summary of the findings can be written in a report or presented to stakeholders.

The research team should decide how they will share and disseminate the information (e.g., presentations, brief summary of the report, social media posts).⁷⁶ A final product should share background on the focus group’s purpose and procedure, findings by themes or questions, and recommendations.⁷⁷ It may also include an introduction, a description of methods, and a conclusion. The final document should be shared with relevant stakeholders in order to view relevant focus group findings and recommendations.

Conclusion

A focus group is a qualitative research method to collect rich and nuanced information via group discussions. Although not without limitations, focus groups can effectively gather multiple viewpoints on a topic. Research teams holding focus groups should consider roles, participant recruitment, and logistics (e.g., scheduling, length, location) when planning a successful focus group. The role of moderator is a critical one as the person must lead discussions and engage participants. Focus group questions should be chosen carefully for clarity and comprehension and flow smoothly from one to the next. With some effort and planning, focus groups can provide valuable qualitative data to help guide and improve policies, programs, and practices.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This project was supported by Grant # 2018-DJ-BX-0761, awarded to the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority by the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Assistance. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice or grant-making component, or the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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