



How to run a focus group

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What is a focus group?

A **focus group** is a qualitative evaluation/ research technique that involves a facilitator guiding an open discussion around a particular topic with a small group (usually 6-10 people) of participants that are representative of a wider population. A focus group helps to collect in-depth, qualitative information about the attitudes, perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of the group through interaction and discussion.



A focus group is not:

- A debate
- Group therapy
- A conflict resolution session
- A problem solving session
- An opportunity to collaborate
- A promotional opportunity
- An educational session”

[How to run a successful focus group, Ken Norman](#)

Focus groups are often also described as **Focus Group Discussions (FDG)** or **Focus Group Interviews** and can be structured (where the facilitator is more deliberate in guiding the group through fixed number of questions/ topics) and unstructured (where there is more of a focus on open and free-flowing discussion that can go in different directions).

The advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

No data collection method is perfect and all have their advantages and disadvantages.

It's important to select the right data collection method, or combination of methods, for the topic you are exploring.

Over the next two slides we explore some of the common advantages and disadvantages of using the Focus Group method.



“ I'm pretty aware that the pursuit of perfection is, inherently, a flawed concept.”

Johnny Wilkinson

As you go through the advantages and disadvantages, we also recommend considering whether the focus group method could be used in combination with other, often complimentary, quantitative methods like interviews or questionnaires.

Advantages of using focus groups

- ✓ As with many more qualitative methods, focus groups can help to gain a deeper understanding of a small number of topic, particularly in combination with more quantitative techniques such as questionnaires or interviews.
- ✓ Discussions and interaction can help to uncover new findings that may not emerge from questionnaires or interviews as participants build and respond to each other's feedback.
- ✓ The process can be engaging and interesting for participants and give them the chance to take value away from participating in the form of new learning.
- ✓ Running focus groups can be lower cost than conducting questionnaires and can be more efficient than 1 to 1 interviews (by the virtue of engaging with multiple interviewees at the same time).
- ✓ Observation of the patterns of how the group interacts and how opinions are formed through discussions can itself be valuable.
- ✓ The group setting opens up the possibility of using games and exercises.

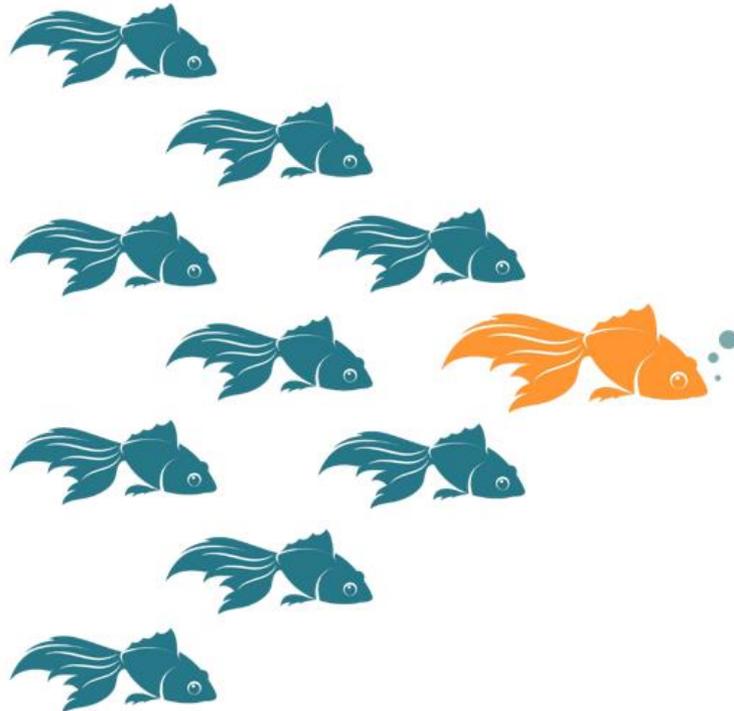


The defining quality of the focus group is its collectivist nature: in concentrating on the group, it allows for expression of a variety of different perspectives (thereby aligning it to a non positivist, interpretivist approach which allows for multiple perspectives). Not only is it possible to gain access to the experiences of many different individuals, but also because individuals interact with one another, data is enriched as group members spark each other off, enabling views to be reformulated through exchange, nuances of meaning teased out, recall strengthened, and shy members given confidence. Data are enhanced as they are drawn from a social context, and interaction is horizontal – between participants – as well as vertical – interviewer/interviewee.”

[How to...Conduct a Focus Group, Emerald Group Publishing](#)

Disadvantages of using focus groups

- ✗ Focus groups can be dominated by more confident and opinionated individuals and the results effected by 'groupthink', where the group seeks coherence and individual view-points can be stifled and 'social desirability bias' where participants respond in a way that they feel will gain approval from the group (or not lead to the group's disapproval).
- ✗ Results can also be effected by *observer dependency* where the results are influenced by the facilitator's reading/analysis of the discussion.
- ✗ The setting for the focus group can also effect the quality of the discussion and resulting data, if too formal the participants may be more reticent to contribute.
- ✗ The lack of anonymity in the group (particularly if they know each other or may come across each other in future) means that particularly sensitive topics may be difficult to discuss.
- ✗ It can be difficult to generalise results from just one focus group.
- ✗ Participants are often not used to the structured and guided interaction of a focus group and this can be intimidating.



'Spicing Up' your focus group sessions

When thinking through the questions you will use in your Focus Group, it's worth also considering different games and exercises that you can use in a Focus Group session to make it more engaging for participants. This can be particularly effective with younger participants, for example:

Drawing

A Focus Group could be started by asking each of the participants to draw their response to a particular question.



Photos

Photos can be used to stimulate discussion by asking the group how they feel about a particular image.

3 examples of 'Spicing Up' a Focus Group

Role-playing

The group can be asked to pretend that they are a different role in their community and to answer a question in that role.

Qualities of a focus group facilitator

The ideal qualities of a focus group facilitator follow below. Of course, it would be unusual to find somebody who has all of these qualities, but it does provide an aspirational list for a facilitator.



- Independent enough from the group that they do not influence responses from the group
- Strong communicator, sympathetic and relatable and able to draw out responses and stimulate discussion
- Able to listen but be identifying patterns and thinking about the next question
- Able to quickly summarise responses in real time and spot patterns in feedback that could be explored further
- Disciplined, not letting the conversation drift too far
- Has at least a basic knowledge of the topics being discussed, while still keeping an open mind and avoiding pushing their own opinions and views
- Create a welcoming, accepting environment that puts the respondents at ease
- Concentrated and disciplined - not letting their thoughts wander or lose the train of the conversation
- Treat all responses equally and deal with more difficult individuals that may try to dominate the group

Planning your focus group

This slide deals with some of the more practical consideration when planning your focus group session.



We recommend between 45 minutes and 90 minutes for your focus group. It's also worth considering how many focus groups you need to/have the capacity to run.

When thinking about the location of your sessions, it's important to find a venue that's easy for participants to find, quiet and without distractions, well heated/ ventilated and with comfortable seating arranged to ensure participants have personal space and can engage with each other.

Make a list of the equipment and resources you need. This can include your own guidance questions, recording equipment and consent forms. You might also want to create demographic information from the group, such as age and gender, and it can be helpful to have a short form ready for the facilitator to complete in the workshop.

Draw up a budget for running the focus group, this could include venue hire, transport to the venue and refreshments for participants. If you are recording the session you may also want to include transcription costs.

Consider how you will invite participants to the group, how they will travel to the venue and when to send reminders.

You may also want to record the session with a voice recorder (these are available as applications on mobile phones or tablets). This will need permission from the group and explaining to the group how the recording will be used and kept confidential.

Recruiting participants

It is important to think carefully about the mix of individuals you wish to take part in the focus group.



- ▶ We recommend that a focus group includes 6-8 participants, however, if there is doubt over whether participants will show up it can be worth inviting a slightly larger number.
- ▶ The participants in your focus group should be representative of the wider participants in your project or programme. Rather than generating a purely random sample, you may want to consider factors such as *age* and *gender* in selecting your participants
- ▶ We don't recommend too significant a variance in the age of participants – e.g. a 7-year old participant may well be intimidated by a 13-year old and may have a different understanding of questions.
- ▶ We don't recommend using incentives for focus groups with that are participating in social programmes or projects but there are differing views on the pros and cons of this.

Conducting your focus group

Below we include some advice and tips across three stages of running a focus group, along with some example timings.



Starting the Session

15 mins

- ▶ Welcome each participant as they come in and chat to put them at ease.
- ▶ Introduce the session, including:
 - Why the session is being run
 - That responses are anonymous and introduce consent forms
 - That they should feel open to contribute and responses are anonymous
 - The timing and ground rules for the session
 - The topic for discussions
- ▶ Ask the group to introduce themselves.



Running the Session

45 mins

- ▶ Make sure you are bringing all participants into the discussion, keeping the discussion flowing and not dominated by one participant.
- ▶ Support participants to expand on their points through questions such as “Could you give us an example of that?” or “Could you tell us a bit more about this/that?”.
- ▶ Pay attention to verbal signals – e.g. are participants getting restless or bored and would benefit from being brought into the discussion.
- ▶ Treat all responses with the same weight and don’t get over-enthusiastic about a point raised or show through your body language that you agree or disagree.
- ▶ Make eye-contact with participants as you ask a question or listen to their response.
- ▶ It’s important to summarise longer or more complex comments to check/show your understanding and for reflection from the group.



Ending the Session

15 mins

- We recommend ending the session with a statement covering the following:
- ▶ Sum up some of the key points from the session
 - ▶ Thank the participants
 - ▶ Explain again why their results are important
 - ▶ Offer the opportunity to get in touch to clarify statements or ask for more information
 - ▶ Explain whether the analysis of the results from the group will be available

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