



A Brief Introduction to Conducting Focus Groups

Anthropologists favor naturalistic observation and conversational interviewing to learn about human attitudes, sentiments, and behavior. Focus groups are another way to access how people think and feel about ideas and experiences. A focus group consists of several people assembled to discuss selected topics led by a moderator who designs, manages, conducts, and reports on the session. Before diving in as a moderator, it would be wise to consult books such as [*Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*](#) and [*Qualitative Consumer and Marketing Research*](#) and connect with an expert for training. The following guidelines will get you started.



Planning

- Set a clear objective on why you need focus groups and what you hope to learn.
- Generate a list of questions that can be answered in the time allotted (typically 90 minutes to two hours). Include closed and open-ended questions and aim to make the group conversational.
- Decide on the kinds of people you want to recruit and limit the size of the group to about six to eight (at most) people. Too many respondents will inhibit in-depth discussion.
- Conduct more than one focus group to increase the range of respondents.
- If different populations and/or locations are or could be factors in your project, reflect those differences by adding groups and/or locations.
- Consider if you want to assign pre-session tasks (e.g., collages, diaries, stories based upon the planned topic).
- Choose an appropriate venue (e.g., research facility, home, office, online).
- Warm up respondents with introductions, including introducing yourself, and the focus group topic to establish rapport.
- Assure the respondents that what happens in the session will be shared only with interested parties; ask for permission to record the session if you plan to do so.
- Use probes such as: “Tell me more”; “Help me understand”; “Why is that important to you?”
- Consider “saturation.” When you hear the same comments frequently, move on.

Focus Groups for Basic Discovery: Sample Interviewing Techniques

- **Purposeful naivety:** To reduce your bias, dispel your assumptions, and help unveil meaning, ask your respondents to assume you just arrived from Mars and to define the category or topic of the focus group (e.g., “What is a dog?” or “What is a meeting?”).
- **Laddering:** This iterative interviewing tool helps researchers access what an experience accomplishes functionally and emotionally for respondents.
- **Deprivation Scenarios:** Ask respondents what they would do if their preferred product, service, or experience was no longer available.
- **Projective Tools:** Collages, the [Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique](#), and similar methods enable respondents to express thoughts and sentiments that might not be accessed in direct questioning.
- **Storytelling:** This technique is a way for respondents to speak expansively and contextually (e.g., “Tell me about a time...”).
- **Journey Mapping:** This process characterizes what respondents do, think, and feel at each stage of engagement with a service, product, or organization.

Focus Groups for Testing: Sample Interviewing Questions for a Service or Product

- How likely would you be to buy or use this service or product on a 1–5 scale (5 = Extremely likely)?
- Why didn't you make your number higher? Why didn't you make your number lower?
- What do you like most? Least?
- How distinctive is this service or product from similar services or products you have seen or experienced?
- Would you recommend this service or product to a friend? Why/Why not?
- How would you improve it? What would you add? What would you subtract?

Analysis

- Transcribe and code (see <https://delvetool.com/>) if you like, and plan on writing a cogent report.
- Keep in mind the difference between what people say they do and what they do.
- Look for recurrent themes across people and different groups, building them into insights.
- Produce questions and hypotheses for subsequent research (e.g., ethnographies, large scale quantitative studies).
- Keep in mind that focus groups yield learning and insights but they are not valid for generalization or prediction.



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