

Focus Group Checklist

First, determine if a focus group is the best choice for data collection

- What is the topic? Is it a very sensitive subject? Is confidentiality particularly important?
- What is your timeline? Focus groups allow you to talk to more people at one time but can be difficult to schedule.
- How large is the population? Focus groups allow you to talk to more people at one time if you can get them to attend.
- Do you have help? Focus groups will require at least one note taker.
- Do you have a budget? Will you provide food to the group? Is there an incentive for participating?
- How easily can I fit this method into my annual responsibilities? Individual interviews conducted regularly may be easier to do on an on-going basis.

Consider your sample:

Who

- Purposeful- choose subjects that you believe will be able to provide you with important information- “stratified” means purposefully choosing from various sub-groups. Types of purposeful sampling: “maximum variation”, “typical case”, “critical case” and “extreme or deviant case” (Patton, 1989, pg 100-107).
- Key informant-a specific person that you believe will give you the most information-sometimes used to develop interview/focus group questions or to begin snowball sampling.
- Snowball-you ask the participants to provide you with names of those that will be able to provide you with important information.
- Convenience- simply asking anyone to whom you have easy access. You should avoid this if possible.
- Random table/random selection of pool to invite.

How Many

- Is the sample reflective of the variation of the group in which you are interested? (Seidman, 1998)
- Have you reached “saturation”: Are you hearing the same information repeatedly? (Seidman, 1998)
- Do you have the funding/resources to continue.
- When you decide to stop, have a reason.

Invitations

- Send invitations to possible participants.
- Blind copy invitees so they can't see who is invited (if by email)
- Include:
 - How sample was chosen (why them?)

- Information about the study (what is the topic, why are you studying it, what you plan to do with the data)
 - Information regarding incentives
 - Confidentiality
 - Respond by date
 - Dates/time location of focus groups
- Do follow ups/reminders.

Structuring your questions:

Order

- Introduction-purpose of the study, tape recording (if appropriate), confidentiality, role of facilitators, relationship of facilitators to the subject, how data will be used, ground rules (write a short script so you don't forget anything)
- Less "risky" questions first
- Attempt to find a natural flow

Wording

- Open ended
- Avoid leading or biased questions
- Use common language/their language when possible

Debrief after the session-provide info if needed, reassure confidentially, ask for permission to contact for clarity. Do a sample review of questions with staff (or SAAT member) if necessary to assess flow, question clarity, etc.

Facilitator Preparation *(Some info taken from Kruger, 1998)*

- Two facilitators: one to take notes and run tape recorder (if needed) and one to run the group.
- Prepare yourself mentally-you must be able to focus -you will have to listen and think quickly (arrive early, review purpose, practice intro and questions, have a to-do list ready and check it before the participant (s) arrives).
- Have what you need (copy of questions, mic/recorder, tapes, batteries, name tags(FG participants), pens, follow up questions, tissues, ..what else); sometimes it's helpful to have your questions on a powerpoint presentation, revealing them one at a time – helps focus visual learners.
- Arrange the room-open circle, where will food go, will there be name tags (you can suggest fake names), take note of restrooms so you can let participants know where to find them.
- Establish rapport, speak clearly, maintain eye contact-show interest (SOLAR), control body language-do not let them know if you agree/disagree, remember your role-not a teacher in this setting because you might shut them down, ask follow-up questions-do not assume you know what they mean-practice with someone; give non-verbal encouragement, I see, uh, huh, etc.
- Stay on track-pull participant(s) back to the topic.

Ways to avoid some issues (Kruger, 1998, pg 58-64)

- Possible roles participants may play
 - Expert-** has had extensive experience in this topic. Has written papers and presented workshops on diversity. Wants everyone to know that he or she knows more about this than most people-not rude or disrespectful intentionally but talks more than others and continually points out expertise. Brings up personal experiences sometimes.
 - Dominant talkers-** Has lots to say. Talks over people and is usually the first to speak when a new question is asked.
 - Disruptive participants-**talk while others are talking-side conversations and interrupting others to speak to the group. Repeatedly brings up personal experiences. May seem angry at times. Easily frustrated. Is at times disrespectful and makes personal attacks at the group, members of the group or the moderator.
 - Ramblers-**keeps talking off the subject-repeats what others have already said. May not be paying attention to the question. Brings up personal experiences sometimes.
 - Incorrect or harmful advice giver-** Gives inaccurate information to the group-tells them there is no place to report problems, etc. Any other lies as appropriate-but not too many.
 - Quiet and shy participant-** Doesn't say much-has to be pulled into the conversation. Will talk once asked but needs to be prompted in order to provide meaningful information.
- When appropriate-reaffirm- "thank you for sharing" "that must have been hard for you" etc. but redirect. Make sure you are not accidentally indicating that you agree with them-especially in a focus group.
- Make sure you set ground rules upfront-all views welcome, treat each other with respect, one person talk at a time, etc.

More information in Focus Group books (series)-Kruger

Data Analysis

- When analyzing data you should have an open mind.
- **Step One:** Reframe: re-familiarize yourself with the purpose of the study (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) - what are you trying to find out? This may sound unnecessary but it is very easy to get caught up in related data that is not really part of the study!
- **Step Two:** Listen to the tapes to verify transcripts and read the data once without trying to develop themes/codes.
- **Step Three:** Re-read data and take preliminary notes on a separate sheet (or in the margins) This is the beginning stages of organizing themes. You will then use the notes to develop primitive outline or system of classifications into which data are sorted initially- the broad "regularities" you see will form the first categories (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). "The researcher does not search for the exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories of the statistician but, instead, identifies the salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting" (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p.154).

- **Step Four:** Continue re-reading text and developing more detailed codes within codes while highlighting the quotes that are relevant-**keep track of line numbers on the list of codes**. These codes are what Marshall and Rossman (1999) call “Analyst-constructed typologies [which] are those created by the researcher that are grounded in the data but not necessarily used explicitly by participants” (p. 154-155). - this just means you get to decide what to call the themes you see
- **Step Five:** Using the list of numbers for each code, remove text related to certain themes and reassemble by codes on a separate sheet of paper (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Tips to Ensure Quality

- Emergent understandings-as new patterns emerge later in data review, the researcher reviews earlier data to ensure that nothing was missed (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).
- Negative case analysis-watch for and note those things that conflict with what you think you see as themes (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, Marshall and Rossman, 1999).
- Krueger (1994, p. 149-151) suggests that researchers consider the following factors when coding and analyzing data:
 - Not only consider the words but also the meaning of the words used by participants. A variety of words will have the same meaning.
 - Consider the comment or question that triggered a particular response and the tone used by the participant. Note takers should make notes of any changes in tones that are noteworthy-you can also go back and listen to the tape if you think the tone is important. What is the context?
 - Take note of changes in opinions/positions-this is more likely in focus groups due to the level of interaction.
 - Take note of the “frequency or extensiveness” (p.150) and passion of certain responses. These responses may be of special importance.
 - Responses that are more specific may be more important than vague comments.
 - Do not miss the big ideas because you are so closely analyzing each individual comment.

References and Additional Information

- Bogdan, R.C. and Biklen, S.K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Holstein, J.A. and Grubrium, J.F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Krueger, R.A. (1994). *Focus groups* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.
- Krueger, R.A. (1998). *Moderating focus groups: Focus group kit 4*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- LeCompte, M.D. and Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M.Q. (1989). *Qualitative evaluation methods*. (10th ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.