

GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

When to Use Interviews and Focus Groups

Use interviews and focus groups when you want to do the following:

- Obtain detailed information about people's thoughts and behaviors
- Explore new issues or generate ideas
- Identify and define problems
- Identify new or assess existing solutions
- Pretest or refine questions for surveys
- Provide context to quantitative data

Steps in Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups

Step 1. Identify evaluation questions to be answered through the interview or focus group

Step 2. Determine your audience and develop questions

Interview or focus group questions should align closely with your evaluation questions.

- Limit to three in-depth questions or 15 short-answer questions
- Avoid close-ended questions
- Ask "how" and "why" questions to establish the processes and reasoning behind perceptions and behaviors
- Ensure that questions are developmentally and culturally appropriate
- Develop probing questions to elicit more detailed responses to your primary questions
- Include a final question that captures topics you may not have considered

- E.g., “What else do you think I should know about XX that I have not asked about?”

Step 3. Develop a protocol

A protocol outlines procedures for conducting the interview or focus group, provides a script of what to say during the interview or focus group, and includes a complete set of questions. Your protocol might also include:

- An explanation of why interview or focus group data are being collected to provide context to participants
- Options for participants to terminate their participation if they wish
- Guidelines for protecting confidentiality
- Specific terminology and definitions to use throughout the interviews or focus groups to ensure consistency
- A flexible structure that allows the conversation to flow naturally within the parameters of the interview or focus group

Step 4. Develop a template or data collection form

- Use the template or form to record participants’ responses and take notes
- Consider recording interviews or focus groups in addition to taking notes so that you can review participants’ responses later in case you missed something during note-taking

Step 5. Identify participants

- Choose a representative set of participants who can provide detailed information related to your questions
- Select participants from different backgrounds, positions, and locations, as well as people with different program experiences, to provide multiple perspectives when answering questions
- Focus groups typically include 6 to 10 participants

- Consider holding multiple focus groups to investigate areas of consensus and differences among participant group

Step 6. Identify and train interviewers and facilitators

- If conducting a focus group, have a facilitator and a notetaker
- The training of interviewers or facilitators should include:
 - An introduction to the evaluation goals or objectives
 - A review of data collection techniques
 - A thorough review of the data collection items and instruments
 - Practice using the instruments
 - Skill-building exercises on interviewing and interpersonal communication
 - Discussion of ethical issues
- A successful interviewer or facilitator is knowledgeable, clear, attentive, sensitive, nonjudgmental, and flexible

Step 7. Conduct the interview or focus group

- If your budget allows, consider offering compensation (e.g., gift cards), refreshments, and/or childcare during interviews or focus groups to increase participation and engagement
- If recording the session, prepare recording equipment beforehand
- For a focus group, arrange seating so that participants can see one another
- Begin the session by explaining the purpose of the interview or focus group and the intended use of the collected data, assuring participants of confidentiality and establishing ground rules for discussion
- Obtain participants' informed consent (using a written form or verbal consent)
- Start with warm-up questions to build rapport and help participants feel comfortable

- Ask one question at a time
- Ask difficult or potentially uncomfortable questions at the end
- If conducting a focus group, make sure everyone's voice is heard by balancing participation (e.g., by asking "Who else has something to say?"), and paying attention to non-verbal communication (e.g., making eye contact)
- Monitor time and stay within limits; aim for 30- to 90-minute sessions
- Take notes even when audio- or video-recording the session
- Use active listening techniques (e.g., affirming, paraphrasing, and clarifying)
- Provide closure at the end of the session and thank participants for joining

Note. This handout was adapted from the following sources:

Guidelines for Interviews and Focus Groups, by the Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/central/pdf/CE5.3.2-Guidelines-for-Interviews-and-Focus-Groups.pdf>.

Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Interviews, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018).

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief17.pdf>.

Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Focus Groups, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018).

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief13.pdf>