

# OPA EVALUATION TA



## Focus Group Tip Sheet

### What is a focus group?

A focus group is a way to collect data in which a group of participants gathers to share knowledge, voices, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about a specific topic or concept. Researchers moderate the small group conversation to collect data that help answer key research questions.

Unlike surveys, focus groups allow for follow-up questions in real time, and, unlike interviews, much of the information collected is based on the discussion between focus group participants as opposed to participants responding to the interviewer directly in an interview setting. For this reason, focus groups work well when respondents feel comfortable sharing honest information in a group setting.

**Focus groups can help researchers learn rich details of participants' experiences.**

### When *should* I conduct a focus group?

- When you're looking for a **broad but detailed range of views on a specific topic**
- When you want to capture a broad range of views on a specific topic **over a short period of time**
- When you want to capture the **lived experiences and lessons learned from people** engaging with a program or set of practices

### When *shouldn't* I conduct a focus group?

- When you're looking to acquire **personal information or information on sensitive topics** that might make participants uncomfortable to share in a group setting
- When you want to collect information from a **large number of people over a relatively short period of time**



## FAQs



**Who should conduct the focus groups?** The research team typically includes at least two people; when conducting focus groups, one person moderates the discussion and the other takes notes and supports logistics, such as welcoming participants and late arrivals. Ideally, to receive honest feedback from people engaged with a program, we suggest that the moderator be independent of the program. The moderator should be aware of the program but not directly tasked with implementing the program. To the extent possible, try to select moderators who can relate to and resonate with focus group participants. Before conducting a focus group, a moderator should be trained on techniques such as making participants feel comfortable, asking questions in a neutral way, probing for additional information, and managing challenging participants.

**How big should my focus group be?** Depending on the topic, focus groups are usually five to eight participants. This size group ensures that all participants can contribute.

**Where should I hold a focus group?** A focus group should take place somewhere that gives your participants the privacy to speak freely. The location should be large enough to accommodate the planned group size.

**How long should a focus group last?** Focus groups typically last one to two hours. If you anticipate your focus group will last longer than an hour, be sure to schedule breaks for your participants!

**How many focus groups should I conduct?** You should conduct as many focus groups as you need to gather rich data from different groups of stakeholders that answer your research questions.

**What do data from a focus group look like?** Focus group discussions are usually recorded, allowing the moderator to focus on the discussion and the notetaker to revise and double-check the notes after the discussion. Data from focus groups include tape recordings, transcripts of those recordings, and the moderator's and notetaker's notes.



## How do I *prepare* for a focus group?

### STEP 1

**Develop a discussion guide with unbiased, open-ended questions related to your overall research question.** This

type of guide, also known as a **protocol**, includes a list of questions and follow-up questions for a moderator to cover during the focus group. It should act as a guide to the conversation, however, not a script.

When creating your protocol, note which questions are the most important and underline key questions or phrases. Avoid leading questions, which are questions worded in a way that will influence participants' responses and that risk conveying your own value judgments and biases on participants. Form questions in a way that limits respondents from answering just yes or no, because you want to elicit detailed information.

Your protocol should also include an introduction in which the moderator explains the purpose of the focus group and research project, who will have access to the data collected from it, and whether it will be confidential.

The protocol should communicate that the focus groups are voluntary and that respondents are not required to answer any of the questions.

### STEP 2

**If required, obtain institutional review board approval before conducting focus groups.** Institutional review boards

oversee research to ensure people's rights are protected. Often, research funded by outside entities, such as the federal government, or research conducted with the goals of publishing findings must be reviewed by an institutional review board before going forward. See the OPA tip sheet for more information about IRB requirements. You should also check to see what other permissions or approvals you need. Some school districts require fingerprinting and basic criminal background checks.

### STEP 3

**Recruit participants for each focus group.** Ideally, your participants will

provide you with a wide variety of perspectives related to your research topic. Spend time thinking about the types of participants you hope to recruit and whether they would be comfortable speaking honestly in front of one other. For example, when

discussing sexual health education, consider whether adolescent males and females will be comfortable speaking in front of one another.

Consider offering incentives to encourage participation, if allowable. Many focus groups include financial incentives, and the research team might want to consider whether that is appropriate given the types of respondents. If your budget and grant allow for it, consider other supports, such as transportation, child care, or food, to facilitate participation.

If you are not familiar with the participants or will not be recruiting participants yourself, discuss with the site, program, or school staff that will recruit participants and explain the goal of the focus group and what you require of participants. You should also consider recruiting more than you need if you think there is a possibility that participants will not show up as expected.



## How do I *conduct* a focus group?

### STEP 1

**Introduce the focus group, thank participants for coming, and obtain informed consent (including permission to record, if applicable) from all participants.** Provide an overview of the focus group's goal and your research project's broader goals. Then, ask the participants if they have any questions before you begin.

### STEP 2

**Set ground rules to create a respectful, open environment for all participants in which all voices are encouraged to participate.** Take time to explicitly state that all opinions are welcome and that you will play an active role facilitating the conversation. Provide examples of what you mean by facilitating the conversation. For example, you might share that you need to cut off certain participants or encourage others to participate to ensure that everyone is comfortable participating in the conversation. Assuming you receive consent, start recording the session.

### STEP 4

**Tailor the discussion guide to each focus group.** Add in any information about the focus group participants (for example, if holding a focus group with facilitators, ensure that you know the site from which they were recruited, the curriculum they deliver, and the types of youth they work with). Fill in any other information you already know and ask participants to confirm it rather than take time reiterating what you know from other data sources. Print out a copy of the protocol with space for taking notes.

### STEP 3

**Facilitate the conversation by using the discussion guide to move the conversation along and prompt participation from each participant.** Be attentive to participants who may feel too shy to participate. Use body language to encourage their participation. At the same time, be mindful of voices that overpower the conversation. You should follow the lead of the participants, even if that means not asking questions in the order listed in the guide. If you are running out of time, prioritize the most important questions. While you facilitate the conversation, make sure to take detailed or shorthand notes to jog your memory after the focus group ends.

### STEP 4

**Wrap up.** Ask the participants whether they have anything they wanted to share but didn't get a chance to say, and whether they have any questions for you. Share your contact information.



## Additional tips for conducting focus groups

### Good moderators will...

- Arrive early to set up the room.** They should spend time thinking about the setting when creating the focus group. Focus groups typically work best when everyone is seated and can see one another.
- Test recording equipment before the focus group.** Moderators should ensure that they have backup batteries and that the device works before conducting the focus group.
- Be familiar with the discussion guide.** Moderators should know the topics they want to cover so they can move from one topic to another easily. It's important to keep the participants on track and prioritize the most important questions identified when writing the protocol. If they are running out of time, moderators should politely remind the participants of time constraints.
- Encourage a positive, respectful, and relaxed group dynamic.** Moderators should set ground rules at the beginning of the focus group and kindly enforce those rules throughout the focus group.
- Build rapport with and among participants.** Moderators can do this through active listening and repeating what participants say
- Use direct and indirect probes to keep the conversation flowing and to get the information needed.** Effective direct probes include "Can you give me an example of X?" or "Tell me more about that." Effective indirect probes include culturally appropriate body language and gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgement or using neutral expressions such as "uh huh" and "I see."
- Remain neutral.** Moderators should not share their personal opinions because this could sway the participants' answers. Remember, the focus of the focus group should be on the participants.
- Only ask one question at a time.** Asking multiple questions at once could confuse or overwhelm the participants, and they will likely forget to answer one of the questions.
- Be comfortable with silence.** Some participants require time to think through their answers and want to share with the group. Moderators should resist the temptation to rephrase the question or talk.
- Encourage each participant to talk and express their opinions at least once during the focus group.** Be respectful of participants who are more reserved or quiet, but remember to draw them into the discussion.
- Anticipate challenging participants who might dominate the conversation and not permit others to contribute to the discussion.** Practicing key phrases to encourage a full group discussion and using body language can discourage one person from dominating the conversation. If a participant attempts to dominate the discussion, moderators can politely redirect by saying, "Thank you for sharing. We want to make sure everyone has a chance to share their thoughts."
- Paraphrase and summarize long, complex, or ambiguous comments throughout the discussion to confirm understanding.** Moderators should verify acronyms and vague pronouns after the participant finishes a train of thought.

## How do I use and analyze focus group data?

**STEP 1** As soon as possible, save your data in a secure location and clean your data by ensuring your transcripts are clear and readable. If you use transcription experts or online transcription service providers, ensure that the transcript is error free by reading through and editing it, if necessary. Cleaning the data is a great first step for your analysis.

**STEP 2** Revisit your discussion guide. Spend time reflecting on what questions were effective and prompted clear information and which questions or topics you should modify for future groups.

**STEP 3** Prepare your data for coding and analysis. When planning your analysis, identify your anticipated themes and develop a systematic way to organize the data collected during a focus group. Anticipate the process by which you will organize your data by thinking about how the information collected fits into those broad analytical themes and the ways in which the information answers your research questions. Some researchers call this developing codes. Codes are labels or categories of information that you anticipate learning about through the focus group. For example, if one of the research questions includes identifying challenges faced by facilitators during implementation, the code might be “challenge.” You can apply one or more codes to a given response or set of responses.

**STEP 4** Systematically code your data using analytical tools such as NVivo or Excel or other such qualitative data analysis tools. Go through each focus group transcript or summary and identify the information that relates to the codes.

**STEP 5** Analyze your data by examining common themes associated with the codes. Analyze your coded data by identifying what common themes emerge from specific questions in your discussion guide. As you examine specific codes, look for examples that illustrate what you see in the data and identify any deviations from patterns you notice. As you analyze your data, determine whether you have to adjust your discussion guide, approach to collecting data, or research questions.

**STEP 6** Synthesize your findings. Use your coded data to answer your research questions by describing variations in responses to each question and overarching patterns across your focus groups. For example, by analyzing all the information associated with “challenges,” you can begin to combine and interpret that data by organizing it into categories of challenges.

**STEP 7** Use and share your findings in a way that suits your audience. You can use graphics, tables, or text to communicate your findings and conclusions.

## Additional resources

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage Publications.

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*. Family Health International.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Miles, M. B., and Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

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