



# Focus Group Guidelines

## What is a Focus Group?

A *focus group* is a small group of people who are selected to participate in an organized discussion, under the guidance of a moderator, to discuss a topic related to their personal experience.

There are two main ways you can use a focus group:

(1) You may be curious about your survey results, and want to find out more about a particular topic. For example, your OurSCHOOL survey results may reveal that interest and motivation is low in your school. You can use a focus group to speak directly with students to gather more in-depth information about why students are not interested and motivated, or any other topic you choose. You can also hold focus groups with parents, teachers, and other key stakeholders.

(2) Focus groups can also be used to test new survey questions before you include them in the survey (*item testing*). For example, you may want to ask students a custom question, but first would like to find out how students would interpret the question, to make sure that they understand what is asked of them.

Here are some focus group ‘best practices’:

## Setting Up:

- Organize a team that can help plan and run the session.
- Organize a team that can work together after the session to review results and create an action plan to use and share the data you have collected.
- Focus group attendees should reflect the population of interest. If the survey will be administered to students in various grades, the focus groups should adequately reflect the range of grades.
- The focus group should be as representative of the student population as possible to ensure all sub-populations are represented (e.g., males, females, immigrants, Aboriginal status, academic competence etc.). You can even hold multiple focus groups on the same topic, with different sub-populations.
- Students should be randomly selected, however it is advisable to avoid having close friends in the same group as this may affect group dynamics. Additionally, the group should also include students who may not typically volunteer.

- *Group size* - The younger the students, the smaller the group size should be. For students age 10-16, group size should range from 5-8 participants. For older students (age 16-18), group size should be a maximum of 8-10 participants.
- It is recommended that groups have small age bands. For example, if the students you would like to speak to range in age from 12-15, you can place students aged 12-13 in one group, and students aged 14-15 in another group.
- Depending on the questions being asked, it is also recommended to split the groups up based on gender, or the anticipated dynamic between the students (e.g., comfort level responding with the opposite sex participating).
- Students in grade 7 and above can have periods of discussion lasting one hour, after which a refreshment break is necessary. Younger students should have shorter discussions, lasting 30-45 minutes.
- Focus group moderators should use first names and have colorful name tags to facilitate rapport building.
- It is important that the focus group takes place in “neutral territory” (outside of the students’ regular classrooms) so that all students feel comfortable participating.
- Consider using probing questions and providing guidelines for participation (i.e. rules of engagement for discussions). Students can be informed about the topic prior to the session, so they can organize their thoughts in advance of the session.



### During the Session:

- The first 10 minutes should consist of an introduction and a brief overview of the purpose of the focus group. It should be made very clear to the students what is expected of them, that a focus group is not a test, and that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Students should be encouraged to freely share their own thoughts and ideas throughout the session.
- More than one moderator should be in the room, if possible. However, it is important not to have too many adults present as this changes the power dynamic in the room.
- The moderator should take extensive notes. Let students know what you will do with the information you are collecting, as note taking may make some students hesitant to participate. The session can be recorded if appropriate permissions are obtained in advance.
- Students should be informed that the moderator is there to glean information from the groups, rather than to provide correct information or to judge their responses.
- During the focus group, students may need to be reminded of the ‘rules’ or instructions.
  - For example, this can include a flip chart or chalk board with notes such as: “everyone gets a chance to speak,” “speak one at a time,” and “you do not have to put up your hand to talk.”

- One way to encourage all students to participate is to alternate verbal responses by asking all students to write their responses on paper, and then asking any 'quiet students' to read what they have written. This approach gives everyone a chance to respond.
- Use probing questions such as:
  - "What are your thoughts?"
  - "Can you explain what you mean"
  - "What does [term] mean to you?"
- Students can be offered a small gift or token for participating.

The following guidelines are only applicable if you are *item testing*:

- Students can be asked to read the questions aloud, which can stimulate them to 'think aloud' when explaining their thought process. Additionally, if a student cannot read or pronounce a word correctly, this could indicate a comprehension problem.
- "Think-alouds" and probes can be used to record thoughts students have as they answer each of the survey questions. The objective is to reveal the thought process involved in interpreting a question and arriving at an answer. These thoughts can be analyzed to diagnose any issues with particular items.



- Older students (age 16-18) may feel very embarrassed when asked to "think-aloud." To encourage participation, moderators can use direct probes such as: "what does this word mean?" and "what do you think it means?"
- Older students may also need to be reminded that it is the survey, and not the students, being evaluated. Frequent reassurance is important for older students.
- Students should be invited to identify any sections or items that they found ambiguous, confusing, or difficult to answer, including the instructions, items, and the response categories.
- Use probing questions such as:
  - "What were you thinking when you read the question?"
  - "How did you come up with that?"
  - "What does [term] mean to you?"

#### After the Session:

- Compile and review all of the information you gathered during the focus group. Does anything stand out? Are you surprised by the results and comments? What is your action plan moving forward?
- Is there any information that you would like to share with key stakeholders? Can you share an action plan of changes you would like to implement?

The following guidelines are only applicable if you are *item testing*:

- Go through all focus group notes and videos (if applicable).
- Can any of the items be improved based on what was learned from the focus group?
- Were any of the response options problematic?
- Can you re-work the questions based on the information you know now?

## References

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