

Step 5

How to Plan a Focus Group

Here is an example of how a *TfC* class planned their focus group? After gathering information on focus groups and looking at focus group prompts that other *TfC* teams produced, the students and teacher in this *TfC* class wrote up a guide for doing a focus group, “Focus Group 101.” Then they conducted the focus group, and then revised the guide. This class developed their own way of organizing and running a focus group. Similarly, you and your students could begin with this resource or another resource in this step and then add, revise, and/or substitute to fit their needs.

Focus Group 101

The Basics:

- Develop and type a script to be read to get informed consent. The script should include the issue under investigation, the research question (in simple terms), who is doing the study and who will see the completed study.
 - a. How long will it take?
 - b. There should be an assurance of confidentiality through anonymity.
 - c. Explain to the participants that we will refer to each of them as an assigned number during the interview. Place cards or give out name tags with each person’s assigned number.
 - d. If taping the sessions, students should include the fact that they are making an audiotape from which they will make a transcript.

- e. Students need to assure focus group participants that they will not distribute or share the notes (or audiotape) beyond the research group.
- Wisely choose—or have student themselves choose in a secret ballot-- the students who will be responsible for 1) overall quality control 2) moderating (facilitating) the focus group; 3) not taking or audio taping. The remaining students serve as “observing researchers” and are responsible for observing, taking notes during the interview, and asking follow up questions (see below).
- Note takers should type prompts/questions and leave room on paper for notes on participant answers under each prompt/question. (The focus group moderator should use a hardcopy and handwrite any notes they take—i.e. key comments etc.). This way, during the conversation, it is easier to follow-up planned prompts with spontaneous questions. The reason that the moderators should take notes with paper and pen is because typing into a laptop or tablet interferes with the interviewer’s eye contact that should be maintained with members of the group. More complete sets of notes will be made by student observers whose typing won’t interfere with the rapport necessary for a successful focus group experience.
- Copy the informed consent script and distribute to all participants. Then read it aloud.
- Even if the observing students are fast typists or have fast handwriting, it is easy to miss a lot when an interview is in progress. We have found it is best when students decide ahead of time what kind of shorthand they should use while recording answers during a focus group discussion. A shared shorthand style means notes can be shared and understood during data analysis. (For hints on creating your own shorthand style see additional resource on the Step 5 resource page.) For example:

- a. F1 and P1 might mean; Focus Group 1 and Participant 1.
 - b. Or, use F1 and the initial or number of a participant.
- Move chairs into a circle with the participants sitting next to one another or, seat everyone around a table, making sure that everyone can see one another.
 - Hand out the number tags AND focus group participants should have his/her name, organization and location on an 8 x 11-inch tri-fold triangular stand-up identifying nameplate.
 - Remember: moderators who are running the group, only take simple hand-written notes and record follow-up ideas for new questions – all other researchers take extensive notes and may use laptops or notepads.
 - After each moderator asks a question and participants answer, the floor can be opened to the observing researchers to see if someone wants to add a follow-up question.
Moderator may want to ask follow-ups as well.
 - The teacher should only interrupt if the follow-ups are too leading or something vital is missed or unclear.