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 someone'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: Identifying evaluation questions to be answered through interviews or focus groups

Step 2: Developing questions

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

- Limit the number of questions to three in-depth questions , 15 questions that require shorter responses, or a manageable combination of the two.
- Avoid closed-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. For example, "What else do you think I should know about XX that I have not asked about?"

Step 3: Developing a protocol

A protocol outlines procedures for conducting interviews or focus groups, provides a script of what to say during the interviews or focus groups, and includes a complete set of questions. In addition, the protocol might include the following:

- An explanation of why the 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 overall structure that allows the conversation to flow naturally within the parameters of the interviews or focus groups.

Step 4: Developing a template or data form

- Use the template or form to record participants' responses, take notes, and pace the interviews or focus groups.

Step 5: Identifying participants

- Select participants based on their unique perspectives or expertise on a topic. Include a representative and diverse sample for a variety of perspectives.
- Focus groups typically include 6–10 participants. Consider holding multiple focus groups to investigate areas of consensus and difference among participant groups.

Step 6: Identifying and training interviewers and facilitators

- If conducting a focus group, have a facilitator and a notetaker.
- The training of interviewers or facilitators should include the following:
    - An introduction to the evaluation objectives.
    - A review of data collection techniques.
    - A thorough review of the data collection items and instruments.
    - Practice in 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: Conducting interviews and focus groups

- To help engage participants in an interview or focus group, provide a type of compensation or resource such as a monetary incentive (for example, a gift card), refreshments, or childcare, if the budget and venue allow. Prepare recording equipment beforehand, if recording the session. 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.
- Use active listening techniques, such as affirming and clarifying, throughout the session.

- If conducting a focus group, make sure everyone’s voice is heard by
    - balancing participation (for example, by asking “Who else has something to say?”), and
    - paying attention to nonverbal communication (for example, 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 (for example, affirming, paraphrasing, and clarifying).
- Provide closure at the end of the session and thank participants.

Note. Adapted from the following sources:

Boyce, C., & Neale, P. (2006). *Conducting in-depth interviews: A guide for designing and conducting in-depth interviews for evaluation input*. Pathfinder International. http://www2.pathfinder.org/site/DocServer/m_e_tool_series_indepth_interviews.pdf

Diem, K. G. (2002). *A step-by-step guide to developing effective questionnaires and survey procedures for program evaluation & research* (FS995). New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension. https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs995/

Walston, J., Redford, J., & Bhatt, M. P. (2017). *Workshop on survey methods in education research: Facilitator’s guide and resources* (REL 2017-214). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4544

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