

What is a Focus Group | Step-by-Step Guide & Examples

A **focus group** is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group is chosen due to predefined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest.

What is a focus group?

Focus groups are a type of qualitative research. Observations of the group's dynamic, their answers to focus group questions, and even their body language can guide future research on consumer decisions, products and services, or controversial topics.

Focus groups are often used in marketing, library science, social science, and user research disciplines. They can provide more nuanced and natural feedback than individual interviews and are easier to organize than experiments or large-scale surveys.

Step 1: Choose your topic of interest

Focus groups are primarily considered a **confirmatory research technique**. In other words, their discussion-heavy setting is most useful for confirming or refuting preexisting beliefs. For this reason, they are great for conducting explanatory research, where you explore why something occurs when limited information is available.

A focus group may be a good choice for you if:

- You're interested in **real-time, unfiltered responses** on a given topic or in the dynamics of a discussion between participants
- Your questions are rooted in **feelings** or **perceptions**, and cannot easily be answered with "yes" or "no"
- You're confident that a relatively **small number** of responses will answer your question
- You're seeking **directional information** that will help you uncover new questions or future research ideas

Note: There are a few other types of interviews you can consider as well. The three most common options are:

- **Structured interviews:** The questions are predetermined in both topic and order.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** A few questions are predetermined, but other questions aren't planned.
- **Unstructured interviews:** None of the questions are predetermined.

Topics favorable to focus groups

As a rule of thumb, research topics related to **thoughts, beliefs, and feelings** work well in focus groups. If you are seeking direction, explanation, or in-depth dialogue, a focus group could be a good fit.

However, if your questions are dichotomous or if you need to reach a large audience quickly, a survey may be a better option. If your question hinges upon behavior but you are worried about influencing responses, consider an observational study.

Example: Research topic your university dining hall is considering adding **vegan meals** to its daily menu. However, the university is hesitant to do so if it will lead to increased food waste. It needs concrete proof that vegan meals will be successful.

- If you want to determine whether the student body would regularly consume vegan food, a **survey** would be a great way to gauge student preferences.

However, food is much more than just consumption and nourishment and can have emotional, cultural, and other implications on individuals.

- If you're interested in something less concrete, such as students' perceptions of vegan food or the interplay between their choices at the dining hall and their feelings of homesickness or loneliness, perhaps a **focus group** would be best.

Step 2: Define your research scope and hypotheses

Once you have determined that a focus group is the right choice for your topic, you can start thinking about what you expect the group discussion to yield.

Perhaps literature already exists on your subject or a sufficiently similar topic that you can use as a starting point. If the topic isn't well studied, use your instincts to determine what you think is most worthy of study.

Setting your scope will help you formulate intriguing hypotheses, set clear questions, and recruit the right participants.

Example: Setting your scope You want to determine the scope of your research, so you consider the following questions.

- Are you interested in a particular sector of the population, such as vegans or non-vegans?
- Are you interested in including vegetarians in your analysis?
- Perhaps not all students eat at the dining hall. Will your study exclude those who don't?
- Are you only interested in students who have strong opinions on the subject?

A benefit of focus groups is that your hypotheses can be open-ended. You can be open to a wide variety of opinions, which can lead to unexpected conclusions.

Step 3: Determine your focus group questions

The questions that you ask your focus group are crucially important to your analysis. Take your time formulating them, paying special attention to phrasing. Be careful to avoid **leading questions**, which can affect your responses.

Overall, your focus group questions should be:

- Open-ended and flexible
- Impossible to answer with “yes” or “no” (questions that start with “why” or “how” are often best)
- Unambiguous, getting straight to the point while still stimulating discussion
- Unbiased and neutral

If you are discussing a controversial topic, be careful that your questions do not cause social desirability bias. Here, your respondents may lie about their true beliefs to mask any socially unacceptable or unpopular opinions. This and other demand characteristics can hurt your analysis and lead to several types of research bias in your results, particularly if your participants react in a different way once knowing they’re being observed. These include self-selection bias, the Hawthorne effect, the Pygmalion effect, and recall bias.

Examples: Focus group questions. There are a few types of questions you can use:

- **Engagement questions** make your participants feel comfortable and at ease:
“What is your favorite food at the dining hall?”
- **Exploration questions** drill down to the focus of your analysis:
“What pros and cons of offering vegan options do you see?”
- **Exit questions** pick up on anything you may have previously missed in your discussion:
“Is there anything you’d like to mention about vegan options in the dining hall that we haven’t discussed?”

Receive feedback on language, structure, and formatting

Professional editors proofread and edit your paper by focusing on:

- Academic style
- Vague sentences
- Grammar
- Style consistency

Step 4: Select a moderator or co-moderator

It is important to have more than one moderator in the room. If you would like to take the lead asking questions, select a co-moderator who can coordinate the technology, take notes, and observe the behavior of the participants.

If your hypotheses have behavioral aspects, consider asking someone else to be lead moderator so that you are free to take a more observational role.

Depending on your topic, there are a few types of moderator roles that you can choose from.

- The most common is the **dual-moderator**, introduced above.
- Another common option is the **dueling-moderator style**. Here, you and your co-moderator take opposing sides on an issue to allow participants to see different perspectives and respond accordingly.

Note: In certain types of focus groups (such as the dueling-moderator style), you will need to have two moderators actively participating. In this case, it may be wise to have a third person in the room ensuring everything runs smoothly.

Step 5: Recruit your participants

Depending on your research topic, there are a few sampling methods you can choose from to help you recruit and select participants.

- **Voluntary response sampling**, such as posting a flyer on campus and finding participants based on responses
- **Convenience sampling** of those who are most readily accessible to you, such as fellow students at your university
- **Stratified sampling** of a particular age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or other characteristic of interest to you
- **Judgment sampling** of a specific set of participants that you already know you want to include

Beware of sampling bias and selection bias, which can occur when some members of the population are more likely to be included than others.

Number of participants

In most cases, one focus group will not be sufficient to answer your research question. It is likely that you will need to schedule three to four groups. A good rule of thumb is to stop when you've reached a **saturation point** (i.e., when you aren't receiving new responses to your questions).

Most focus groups have 6–10 participants. It's a good idea to over-recruit just in case someone doesn't show up. As a rule of thumb, you shouldn't have fewer than 6 or more than 12 participants, in order to get the most reliable results.

Lastly, it's preferable for your participants not to know you or each other, as this can bias your results.

Step 6: Set up your focus group

A focus group is not just a group of people coming together to discuss their opinions. While well-run focus groups have an enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere, they are backed up by rigorous methods to provide robust observations.

Confirm a time and date

Be sure to confirm a time and date with your participants well in advance. Focus groups usually meet for 45–90 minutes, but some can last longer. However, beware of the possibility of wandering attention spans. If you really think your session needs to last longer than 90 minutes, schedule a few breaks.

Confirm whether it will take place in person or online

You will also need to decide whether the group will meet in person or online. If you are hosting it in person, be sure to pick an appropriate location.

- An uncomfortable or awkward location may affect the mood or level of participation of your group members.
- Online sessions are convenient, as participants can join from home, but they can also lessen the connection between participants.

As a general rule, make sure you are in a noise-free environment that minimizes distractions and interruptions to your participants.

Consent and ethical considerations

It's important to take into account ethical considerations and informed consent when conducting your research. **Informed consent** means that participants possess all the information they need to decide whether they want to participate in the research before it starts. This includes information about benefits, risks, funding, and institutional approval.

Participants should also sign a **release form** that states that they are comfortable with being audio- or video-recorded. While verbal consent may be sufficient, it is best to ask participants to sign a form.

A disadvantage of focus groups is that they are too small to provide true **anonymity** to participants. Make sure that your participants know this prior to participating.

There are a few things you can do to commit to keeping information private. You can secure **confidentiality** by removing all identifying information from your report or offer to pseudonymize the data later. **Data pseudonymization** entails replacing any identifying information about participants with pseudonymous or false identifiers.

Preparation prior to participation

If there is something you would like participants to read, study, or prepare beforehand, be sure to let them know well in advance. It's also a good idea to call them the day before to ensure they will still be participating.

Step 7: Host your focus group

Consider conducting a tech check prior to the arrival of your participants, and note any environmental or external factors that could affect the mood of the group that day. Be sure that you are organized and ready, as a stressful atmosphere can be distracting and counterproductive.

Starting the focus group

Welcome individuals to the focus group by introducing the topic, yourself, and your co-moderator, and go over any ground rules or suggestions for a successful discussion. It's important to make your participants feel at ease and forthcoming with their responses.

Consider starting out with an icebreaker, which will allow participants to relax and settle into the space a bit. Your icebreaker can be related to your study topic or not; it's just an exercise to get participants talking.

Leading the discussion

Once you start asking your questions, try to keep response times equal between participants. Take note of the most and least talkative members of the group, as well as any participants with particularly strong or dominant personalities.

You can ask less talkative member's questions directly to encourage them to participate or ask participants questions by name to even the playing field. Feel free to ask participants to elaborate on their answers or to give an example.

As a moderator, strive to remain **neutral**. Refrain from reacting to responses, and be aware of your body language (e.g., nodding, raising eyebrows) and the possibility for observer bias. Active listening skills, such as parroting back answers or asking for clarification, are good methods to encourage participation and signal that you're listening.

Many focus groups offer a monetary incentive for participants. Depending on your research budget, this is a nice way to show appreciation for their time and commitment. To keep everyone feeling fresh, consider offering snacks or drinks as well.

Step 8: Analyze your data and report your results

After concluding your focus group, you and your co-moderator should debrief, recording initial impressions of the discussion as well as any highlights, issues, or immediate conclusions you've drawn.

The next step is to transcribe and clean your data. Assign each participant a number or pseudonym for organizational purposes. Transcribe the recordings and conduct content analysis to look for themes or categories of responses. The categories you choose can then form the basis for reporting your results.

Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Just like other research methods, focus groups come with advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- They are fairly straightforward to organize and results have strong face validity.
- They are usually inexpensive, even if you compensate participant.

- A focus group is much less time-consuming than a survey or experiment, and you get immediate results.
- Focus group results are often more comprehensible and intuitive than raw data.

Disadvantages

- It can be difficult to assemble a truly representative sample. Focus groups are generally not considered externally valid due to their small sample sizes.
- Due to the small sample size, you cannot ensure the anonymity of respondents, which may influence their desire to speak freely.
- Depth of analysis can be a concern, as it can be challenging to get honest opinions on controversial topics.
- There is a lot of room for error in the data analysis and high potential for observer dependency in drawing conclusions. You have to be careful not to cherry-pick responses to fit a prior conclusion.