# Conducting a Focus Group Discussion in Qualitative Research

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## Abstract

This article aims to explain the focus group discussion, or focus group interview, method in qualitative research. This method is commonly used in many fields, such as organizational studies, health and medicine, and politics. Particularly, this paper elaborates on the characteristics of focus group discussions, outlines their stages, and shares tips and tricks for conducting them. The journal article serves as a comprehensive resource for researchers looking to integrate focus group discussions into their methodology. It offers practical advice on the preparation, execution, and analysis stages of FGDs, thereby enhancing data quality and overall research effectiveness.

**Keywords**: Focus Group Discussion; Focus Group Interview; Qualitative Research; Data Collection

## Introduction

Focus group discussion, or focus group interview, is one of the data collection methods in the qualitative research approach. Emerged as an alternative to one-on-one interviews, focus group discussion gained popularity in the 1960s as a tool for market research (Bloor et al., 2012; Hennink, 2014). According to Hennink (2014), this method involves an interactive discussion about a specific issue with a group of participants, led by a moderator. Focus group discussion brings together people with certain characteristics which is relevant to the topic (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The key element of this method is the interaction among participants, which enables researchers to explore different perspectives, thoughts, and feelings within the qualified group (Hennink, 2014).

Furthermore, there may be dynamics in the discussion that generate data that are rich, natural, spontaneous, and sometimes unpredictable (Bloor et al., 2012; Hennink, 2014; Krueger RA, 2014). There is a wide range of applications of focus group discussion, either for academic or non-academic purposes. In organizational studies, this method may provide insight into employee behavior (productivity, morale, engagement), planning and goal setting, needs assessment, and decision-making (Krueger RA, 2014). For example, Christina et al. (2014) use staff as a focus group to discover key determinants of the workplace's environmental behaviors. In the health and medicine field, focus group discussion facilitates health promotion strategies and campaigns (Bloor et al., 2012; Hennink, 2014; Krueger RA, 2014). For example, Houston et

al. (2011) invited people who had successfully managed blood pressure problems to participate in a focus group and share their stories. In politics, this method is commonly used in elections or to test people's reactions to certain policies (Saunders, M; Lewis, P; Thornhill, 2012). For example, Henn and Foard (2014) investigate Britain's young people's engagement in politics using focus group discussions (Henn & Foard, 2014).

This article will thoroughly examine the process of conducting a focus group discussion. Firstly, it will illustrate the characteristics of this method. Then, this paper will outline the steps to prepare for a focus group discussion. Furthermore, the article will share tips and tricks for effectively carrying out focus group discussions. Finally, this article will conclude by summarizing the key points of this method.

## Steps in Conducting a Focus Group Discussion

### FGD Characteristics

FGD is eligible to be conducted if we fulfill several requirements to run this type of data collection. We need to ensure that we fulfill these requirements before starting the steps of FGD. First, the FGD means that the researcher and the participants discuss 1 focus topic in particular. The researcher will give the topic earlier when inviting participants to take part in the session(s). Next, the researcher should run the FGD in small groups. Even though the previous studies state a different number of participants in each FGD, (Saunders, M; Lewis, P; Thornhill, 2012), however, among all studies, the proportional number of participants ranged between 4 – 12 people. To decide how many people we invite to be participants in our FGD, we need to rethink our topic and which perspectives we need to hear.

Furthermore, we need to understand that, different from quantitative data that results in numbers to analyze; the FGD produces data in the form of opinions and recommendations. This data then will be analyzed using a qualitative approach with certain tools used by the researcher. Finally, we need to highlight that the final result of FGD is not always and not only a consensus, but the most important one is the result should be more of a brainstorming mechanism.

### FGD Step 1: Participant preparation

After understanding all the FGD characteristics, now it is time to prepare the FGD step by step. The first step is participant preparation which consists of 2 stages. The first step is recruiting the participants. In this step, the researcher should pay careful attention to:

1. Whom should I speak with?
   This decision is mainly important to enrich the data from FGD. To decide whom we need to speak to, we need to rethink our research objectives and what perspectives we need to hear.
2. Who will best answer my questions?
   Relate closely to the first question, this stage is majorly the restate and reconfirm stage from stage 1. Some research needs a government perspective, hence, they will invite government representatives into the FGD but this is not necessary. Again, by referring to our research objectives, we should know who will be able to answer our questions.
3. How many people are in one group?
   As mentioned above, the number of participants varies between FGDs. Some FGDs require a large number of participants due to the large coverage of topics and research objectives. Some others will leave out will small number of participants. Deciding the number of people who will participate should be easily done after we answer stage 1 and 2 above.
4. Different backgrounds for the same aim

The last thing we need to acknowledge in the participant preparation is that we will invite people from different backgrounds to talk about the same topic and discover the same aim. Hence, despite their differences, they should talk about the same topic and try to reach the same aim. For example, when the FGD aims to discover what skills are needed for a university graduate, the participants should come from industry, government, NGO, and other stakeholders who need employees. Despite their different background, they will talk about what kind of skills they require in their field of work.

## FGD Step 2: Participants Screening

Accomplishing the first step will gain a list of possible participants for our FGD. Sometimes, this list still has a redundant role. For instance, our list consists of 2 people from the industry, and we only need 1 person. Hence, to decide which one should participate in the FGD, we need to conduct a screening stage. The screening step is in the form of a 5-minute phone or video call to identify eligible participants and explain the general purpose of FGD. In this case, the list of questions can be as follows:

**Suggested Screener Questionnaire for Case Study**

**Frequent Flier Service Study (Business Fliers) Focus Group Screener**
Date: __ __/ __ __/ __ __Interviewer ID #: __ __ __ __

[Ask to speak with male or female head of household who is currently employed.]

Hello, my name is _____ with ABC Research in Anytown. We are conducting a brief research study with business travelers. We are not selling anything and will only take a few minutes of your time. [If respondent advises he or she is not a business traveler, ask if anyone else in house is. If yes, transfer or arrange callback; otherwise, thank and terminate.]

S1. Do you travel for business purposes in your current job?

    1. Yes [continue to S2]

    2. No [check re: other in household; otherwise skip to S5]

    3. Unemployed [thank and terminate]

    4. Don't know/refused [thank and terminate]

S2. On average, how many business flights per year do you take? [record one only]

    1. None/don't fly on business [skip to S5]

Figure 1. Suggested Screener Questions

Taking into account, this stage is not necessary. It is only recommended to do so if we have multiple possible participants for one role.

## FGD Step 3: Moderator Preparation

While choosing and deciding the suitable time for FGD, we need to train the moderator to run their role well. In this stage, the moderators should recognize their roles during the FGD. There are three things a moderator should remember in this stage:

1. Provide information
   As the opening and first information a moderator should inform the participants, and a moderator should introduce the team and the aim of the study. The team of researcher in an FGD usually consist of a moderator, a timekeeper, and a note-taker. Following that,

the moderator should explain the ethical issue regarding the process and ask for the participant's agreement. It is suggested to ask the question twice to reassure.

2. Facilitate discussion

When the discussion starts, the moderator should ensure that all participants are on track and do not talk out of topic. Furthermore, all participants should be given equal opportunities to present their views during the time. Pay attention, the FGD has a limited time, participants' talking time should be carefully considered.

3. Videotaped or audiotaped the process

FGD results will be used as the analysis. Hence, to ensure we do not miss something, video and audiotaped are necessary. However, remember to ask participants permission to record all the sessions before starting the discussion.

A point to remember in this moderator role is a moderator should be consistent and persistent during the discussion. Some participants may be chatty and talk out of topics, while others will not talk too much. In this case, a moderator should be able to redirect the participants to the related topic or try to elicit more from participants.

Table 1. Example of Questions and Questions Order

| Type of Questions | Questions |
|---|---|
| Opening | Tell us your name and How long have you participating in this program |
| Introduction | How did you learn about this program? |
| Transition | Think back to when you first involved. What were your first impression? |
| Key | What was the start-up process like for you? |

| | |
|---|---|
| Key | What were the advantages of this program? |
| | What were the disadvantages of this program? |
| | Are you any different after joining the program? if so, why? |
| Ending | If you had a chance to advise on this program, what advice would you give? |
| Ending | What do we miss? is there anything we should have talked but we didn't? |

## FGD Step 4: Questions Setting

The next step of FGD Preparation is the questions setting. There are a lot of significant things in this stage, from the requirement of the questions to the order of the questions. Firstly, for the questions set, moderator should set the questions as follows:

1. The questions should relate to the research objectives

2. Open-ended questions
3. Follow the order of the questions
4. Sequencing
5. Uses time wisely

Again, the questions should aim to reach the research objectives. Hence, the questions should relate to it and formulated in open-ended rather than yes/no questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to deliver their opinions and the reason behind their answers. This type of question is necessary if we relate it to the FGD characteristics as a brainstorming mechanism. At the same time, the questions should be in order and sequencing to allow the flow of the discussion and easier for participants to follow the question's logic. Finally, taking into account that we have limited time for one FGD, every question should be dedicated to a specific time.

Secondly, in setting the question, a moderator should pay attention to the questions order. This order is divided into some types:

1. Opening
2. Introduction
3. Transition
4. Key question(s)
5. Ending(s)

### Example of Questions to Understand an Issue

These questions were used with supervisors of county employees to understand the issue of diversity in the workplace.

| | | Minutes |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Tell us your name and what area you supervise. | 5 |
| 2. | What is your definition of diversity? | 5 |
| | **Messages** | |
| 3. | What do you hear people saying about diversity<br>a. over coffee breaks?<br>b. at staff meetings or in publications? | 5 |
| 4. | Who cares about diversity, and how do you know they care?<br>Probe: Is diversity a priority of management? How can you tell? | 10 |
| | **Retention** | |
| 5. | What makes diverse employees stay? | 10 |
| 6. | What makes diverse employees leave? | 10 |
| | **Barriers and Incentives** | |
| 7. | As supervisors, what incentives are there for you to create and maintain a diverse workforce? | 10 |
| 8. | As supervisors, what makes it tough to create and maintain a diverse workforce? | 10 |
| | **Resources** | |
| 9. | How comfortable are you with the amount you know about different races or cultures you might hire? | 5 |
| 10. | Do you have resources for handling tense diversity issues? If so, where do you go? | 5 |
| | **Improvements** | |
| 11. | What could be done to make the work environment more inviting for diverse employees? | 15 |
| 12. | What could the county do to help make supervisors more effective in managing diversity? | 15 |
| | **Closing Question** | |
| 13. | If you had one minute to give advice to (name of person), the director of diversity programs, about how to retain a diverse workforce in the county, what would you say? | 5 |
| | **Total** | 110 min. |

Figure 2. Example of the FGD questions, their order and their time

The number of the question is not restricted to certain numbers. However, the questions should not be too many, repeated, and not straightforward. Considering the time limitation, questions should be revisited several times to only leave out the straight-to-the-point questions to reach the research objectives. Table 1 is the list of questions that aim to give feedback of a program that has just been finished.

Figure 2 will give another example of the FGD questions and their order but the list is completed with the time counter.

## FGD Tips and Tricks

Conducting an FGD is challenging for the new researcher, especially for those who have never conducted it before. This section will present the tips and tricks to guide the early researcher to succeed in their FGD.

1. Use open-ended questions

As mentioned above, yes/no questions are not suitable to reach FGD aims. On the contrary, using open-ended questions will be beneficial. Open-ended questions are types of questions where we do not provide any correct answer for participants, all answers are based on participants' perspectives. In this case, the open-ended questions can be in the form of asking experience, opinion, recommendation, or any subjective questions

2. Avoid asking why

Following the open-ended questions to ask about one's opinion, most of the researchers will use the -why questions. While this question is not forbidden, however, previous studies recommend using -how rather than -why. This is because using -why will psychologically direct the participants to try to answer the correct answer rather than answering based on their perspectives. Align to the FGD aims to grab participants' opinions, the question type should not intimidate them.

3. Keep questions simple

Regarding the different backgrounds of the participants, the questions delivered to them should be understood by all. Hence, the questions should be simple yet straight to the point so both can be understood and answered correctly. On the other hand, using difficult words will waste the moderator's time in case the participants ask to repeat and elaborate on the questions. Hence, time-wise, using simple words is better.

4. Be cautious about giving an example

A moderator should not direct the participants' answers. A moderator should minimize themselves from sharing their opinion during the session and be cautious about giving examples. Giving an example related to the question is counted as directing a discussion because participants may be affected or impacted by the example we give. Hence, if the moderator should be asked to give some examples, he/she can try to deliver similar examples unrelated to the topic. For example: Can you give me an example of what kind of skill you train in the University to match with Industry needs?, rather than answering all the students' skills related to the industry, a researcher can say we train the student to be able to handle the administrative and strategic job, we also have some digital-based classes.

5. Estimate the time for each question

A moderator should have good time management and this job can be supported by a timekeeper who will always remind both moderator and participants of the time consumption. However, it is recommended to set the time for each question while setting the question list for early anticipation. The key questions should spend more time than the introduction and transition. At the same time, spare only a little time for introduction and leave more to the more important part. Keep opening, introduction, and transition questions as simple as possible.

6. Team member

Each FGD session should consist of a set of team with at least 3 people. Generally, the first person will act as moderator, the other 2 will act as note-taker and timekeeper. The other 2 people will assist the moderator to ensure the session runs well. However, with the help of technology, note-takers and timekeepers can be replaced by certain applications/software/AI-based websites.

7. Homogeneity

The key to gaining rich data from the FGD process is to discuss with different backgrounds of people. The more diverse the background, the richer the data we collect. At the same time, we also can achieve contrast and supported opinions between participants. In some cases, knowing this will be important for the research objectives. In contrast, discussing a certain topic with the same background people will not bring a meaningful result due to fewer and similar perspectives between participants.

8. Moderator-focused or participant-focused

When we run the FGD, the moderator will be able to notice what kind of FGD they are in at the moment. With a high level of education and expert participants, mostly the discussion will run without a lot of moderator participation. The FGD participants will discuss one another, adding, disagreeing, and supporting each other opinions will be common in this situation. This type of FGD is called participant-focused FGD. On the contrary, some participants need a more active role from the moderator. In this FGD type, discussion between participants will less likely happen unless the moderator orders them to do so. This FGD type is called moderator-focused FGD.

9. Don't drive the discussion but keep them on track

This point supports all the above points but it is substantial in the FGD process. A moderator should not drive the discussion, not lead the answer, and not give opinions. All answers should come from the participants' perspectives. However, in some FGDs, the participants are chatty and knowledgeable, hence they will talk a lot. In this case, the moderator should always keep them on track. As mentioned above, sometimes the moderator should stop the participants if they talk too long or talk out of topic.

10. Listening and Probing skill

FGD trains the researcher or the moderator two basic skills. They are listening skills and probing skills. By conducting an FGD, we have to listen more than talk. The more researchers conduct an FDG, the more their listening skills will be trained. At the same time, a moderator should be able to dig deeper into participants' answers to reach the bottom of their opinion to finally answer their research questions set for the FGD. This

activity certainly can train the moderator's probing skills. However, this point can affect vice versa to the researcher/moderator. It is either FGD trains moderators to increase their listening skills and probing skills, without needing to have both skills at the beginning, or listening skills and probing skills can help moderators in conducting the FGD. Whatever is, as long as the main objectives are reached. None of the way is wrong.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this journal offers an in-depth guide for researchers on the intricacies of organizing and executing Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as a qualitative research tool. The article underscores the distinct aspects of FGDs, highlighting their targeted discussion topics, intimate group environments, qualitative data collection, and the pursuit of a wide range of viewpoints rather than a unanimous agreement.

The authors present a systematic approach to carrying out an FGD, initiating the careful selection of participants whose contributions are pertinent to the research goals. They advocate for a screening process to ensure a diverse yet balanced group composition, thereby preventing the overrepresentation of any single viewpoint. The preparation of the moderator is also stressed as a critical factor for a successful discussion, which includes fostering active participation, maintaining group dynamics, and overseeing the recording of the discussions.

Furthermore, the article details the significance of crafting questions that reflect the research aims and are open-ended and structured to promote a natural progression of dialogue. It offers valuable insights for novice researchers on effective FGD facilitation, such as non-directive questions, avoiding bias-inducing prompts, and judicious allocation of time for each query to keep the session on track and fruitful.

Overall, the journal article stands as a thorough resource for researchers who intend to incorporate FGDs into their research repertoire. It delivers actionable guidance on the preparatory, operational, and analytical phases of FGDs, thereby contributing to the elevation of research caliber and the fulfilment of investigative aims.

## Additional Information

This topic has been presented in the online workshop "FGD Trainings and Simulations" organized by Indonesia Youth Development (IYD) and Doctrine UK on 29 March – 14 April 2024.

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