



Focus Group FAQ's

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What skills does a moderator need?

Business, consultancy and organisational skills

- Understanding the business issue, the objectives and how best to use the research
- Working with, and guiding clients and users of the research
- Where relevant, an understanding of (consumer) psychology, group dynamics and marketing
- Organising the people and processes effectively so the research can go well.

Personal qualities and skills

- Empathy and warmth, to be able to establish rapport with participants and clients
- Sensitivity to body language and emotional signals
- Creative eliciting skills – and sensitive probing
- Strong listening skills
- Respectful
- Non-judgmental, managing own biases
- Flexibility to adapt to the iterative nature of projects and learning gained
- Not letting your own ego get in the way – and never allowing your own view to surface
- Can seem engaged in the subject but in reality stays neutral
- A sense of humour
- Stamina and patience
- Ability to draw on different roles as needed (e.g. seem naïve to get full explanations or be more like a parent or teacher if you need to get tasks finished.)

Good moderators can balance the requirements of task, people and process – getting information while paying attention to people’s needs and the processes that are ongoing in the group.

Knowledge about research

- Understanding how to set up groups and explore topics
- Knowledge of eliciting skills and how to build relationships
- Managing group dynamics, difficult situations and respondents
- Using techniques to help elicit deeper and more relevant information

Analytic and communication skills (for the analysis and reporting phase.) Also being able to tolerate some disorder and ‘not knowing’ during the fieldwork to avoid jumping to conclusions.

What do I need to organise before the research?

- Your understanding of the research objectives – do your homework and be prepared to question and challenge.
- The scope of the research (so you know what to include or exclude)
- Be clear about the hypotheses you have about the research issue to avoid confirmation bias

Recruiting/Practicalities

- The best sample to tell you what you need (purposive sampling)
- An effective screening process
- Practicalities of venues, spaces, food, and timing. Try to have quiet food if they will eat while talking!
- Check in with the recruiter as you go to avoid surprises
- Means of recording / note taker / flip charts
- Name labels for respondents (remembering names helps you manage the group)

- Stimulus material and other stuff for projectives and exercises
- Invitation letter or email re any pre-tasks, location and timing, incentives, information about confidentiality, Code of Conduct issues, etc.
- Briefing anybody else who will attend on what to expect and how to view - do they understand that you need flexibility to manage the process?

Think about what mood and types of relationship you will need to foster

- How will you relate to the different respondent groups?
- Do you need to acknowledge and manage any prejudices or expectations about them?
- What problems and reactions can you anticipate and prepare for?
- What will be the appropriate mood for the research? Serious? Light and entertaining?
- What warm up exercises and interview techniques can you use to manage the mood and the interactions?

How do I write a topic guide?

- A long and detailed guide is not practical to use in an interview. It is inflexible, draws focus away from the respondents, and interferes with building the research relationship.
- What the researcher needs is closer to a 'guiding light'. An overall direction, key steps along the way, but flexibility in question construction, order and timing.

If you have to adapt an overlong guide, chunk it into topics, rewrite it into bullet points, and use lists of probes rather than full questions.

Check (with the client) as to what is essential and what is nice to know. Explain you need some flexibility in order to manage the research relationship and explore new ideas. The process of rewriting will help you internalise it.

Questions for writing a topic or discussion guide

1. What hypotheses or ideas do you need to explore and what is a sensible order? (Easy questions at the start, tricky ones later)
2. Have you operationalised vague concepts e.g. how will you know 'engagement' when you see it?
3. What do you need to get people to define before you start discussing it?
4. What do you need spontaneous / uninfluenced views on? (Awareness at the start / use individual exercises to stop people influencing each other) Avoid order effects.
5. How much context do you need to understand why they say what they say?
6. How can you explore the subject without asking direct questions? (E.g. Not 'what will make you buy it' but factors influencing purchasing)
7. What can you reasonably expect people to remember/ be able to tell you fairly accurately?
8. What topics might be considered private and how do you encourage self-disclosure?
9. When might you have to use techniques to help focus and self-insight?
10. Are you using language appropriate for the participants?

11. What is the flow? Will it keep people engaged? Do you need to manage their energy and interest?
12. Have you left enough time to explore emergent ideas and explore new themes opened up by projective techniques?
13. Is the guide as open and free of assumptions as possible?
14. Have you a rationale for everything you ask and do?
15. Are you also using the guide to manage process (getting to know people, building confidence and trust?)

The structure of a guide

The most common structure is like a funnel, with easy questions at the start, focusing down into narrower and more difficult subject areas. But you can follow a longitudinal process, e.g. a customer journey, or use a mind map.

Always try a guide on for size. Ideally run through with a colleague who is not part of the project – or at the very least, put yourself in the respondent's shoes.

Why do I need to be aware of the different stages of a group?

As groups develop, they go through different stages, and the moderator needs to manage each stage. Not all groups go through all the stages. You will be able to recognise what stage a group is at, both by body language and by the quality of energy in the room.

One useful model is the adapted Tuckman: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Mourning.

Forming

Since the group don't know each other, or the task, they are dependent on the moderator, who has a lot of power at this stage. Everyone is very much a separate individual, and there may be social anxiety about fitting in with others. Even confident looking people may be nervous that they won't know what they should or be able to do the tasks.

The moderator is treated as a group leader at this stage, which must change. By telling people some of what is to come, and explaining the moderator role, you can empower the group and reduce any undue influence you may have.

Storming

This may not always be very evident in research groups, nor does it always happen after forming – the group can run into storming at any time. Storming is about share of voice, about influence on the group, and it may involve challenge to the power of the moderator, or challenges between respondents. It is at this stage the dominant respondents emerge, while others may go into a passive sulk – which is why it is important to deal with potentially difficult respondents early on. You may have to signal or repeat that you need to hear equally from everybody to spread the power evenly through the rest of the group. The energy at this point may feel quite negative.

Norming

This happens right from the start of the group, when the moderator models the group norms. Every group needs 'rules' to keep it safe and functioning well. However respondents also negotiate these between themselves, often without being aware of it. Some of the more obvious ones are the level of politeness or banter, the degree of disclosure, the turns which people take in speaking. There may also be norms around decision making in the group, which will emerge as patterns. There will be unconscious norms, which only come to light if one is broken. Challenging or explicitly stating norms may feel uncomfortable to do, but it helps keep the group functioning well.

Performing

There is a sense of concentration and task orientation. Individual disputes are forgotten as the whole group focuses on the task at hand. This is the time to introduce projectives, stimulus material and any difficult questions you need the group to work on.

One of the ways to move into performing is in fact to introduce a task which will absorb the group as a whole and enable them to forget all their earlier concerns. This stage uses group energy, so after a time it runs out, and the group slips back into one of the other stages or needs to have a quiet period to re-energise.

Mourning

Having gone through all of these stages the group will have bonded to the stage where it now feels more comfortable to be in it than to be separate from it. The mourning stage is to enable group members to let go. It should be signalled when approaching the last topic or in the last 5 or 10 minutes, that the group will finish soon. Summarising at the end gives respondents of sense of what they have achieved – and the moderator and chance to check their understanding of the situation. It is good to ask respondents if there is anything they want to say that they have not been able to say so far – it really 'closes the circle'.

Mourning has a relaxed but satisfied energy about it.

Summary of the Tuckman Model of the Group Life Cycle (adapted)

STAGE	UNDERLYING PROCESSES	WHAT YOU NOTICE/ WHAT HAPPENS	MODERATOR'S TASK
FORMING	People feel separate, dependent, anxious: Who am I here? How will I fit in? What are the risks?	Awkwardness Caution Light social chit chat Testing behaviours	Empower & make safe by explaining the task, modelling behaviour & encouraging interaction. Behave as you would want them to
STORMING	Share of voice, demanding attention Challenges to moderator and others 'Pecking order' Opting out or rebelling	Challenge moderator or each other; play up Question the task Emphasise individuality Dominant & passive emerge Physical disruption	Signal strongly that you value all opinions equally Accept negative views & look for positives too Stop potentially dominant respondents Fight or flight responses
NORMING	Sense of harmony, cohesion & support Norms emerge Group takes off	People take turns in speaking without you having to ask The energy feels more positive & harmonious	Notice and reinforce norms; deal with any implicit rule breaking Make plans & set agendas Keep channels of communication flexible
PERFORMING	Individuals are subservient to the group Roles are flexible and task oriented	Concentration & flow Everything seems easy Engaged body language. Group works without being asked	THE time to introduce difficult issues, stimulus material or projectives Let go of the group if it is working well and on topic
<i>Re-adjustment: performing uses energy, so after a while the group slips back into one of the other stages before it can perform again</i>			
MOURNING OR ADJOURNING	Completion of the task and disbanding of the group Need for closure	If you haven't completed it, people may not want to go. If someone leaves early, the process feels incomplete.	Signal that the end is near Summarise to give a sense of achievement Ask if there is anything else they want to say and thank them

How do you manage a research group?

During the research you are simultaneously:

- Thinking (about how what the respondent has said or not said fits with the research objectives, or the ideas you have developed)
- Pulling out potential hypotheses to probe further

- Deciding whether to follow-up, clarify, move on
- Formulating the next question
- Watching the body language
- Taking account of the dynamics of the interview and deciding how to intervene if needed
- Managing the time you have.

Listening

- Actively and attentively – to the music as well as the words (the sub-text)
- In a non-judgmental, empathetic and respectful way – and showing you have heard by summarising well.

Building rapport (and a shared sense of understanding)

- Using their language – avoiding marketing or other jargon
- Giving respondents your full attention and showing you respect them
- Showing that you are interested in understanding his or her perspectives
- ‘Mirroring’ or ‘matching’ respondents’ verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

Observing

- Need to be aware of and sensitive to respondents’ body language:
- To interpret what they are saying correctly and pick up on any inconsistencies

Managing yourself Think about your role in the interview process, ask:

- What assumptions am I making about the respondents?
- What assumptions am I making about the topic?
- How prepared are you to hear a view different from your own?
- How prepared are you to hear something shocking?
- Examine your own feelings, views, prejudices

Managing respondents

- Noticing their levels of energy and patterns of response
- Being proactive in encouraging quiet ones and discouraging dominants
- Addressing times when the group process is stuck or negative
- Using snowballing for key questions for more synergy and serendipity

And of course, using a full range of eliciting skills to help delve below the surface attitudes, social desirability posturing and group roles that you will encounter.

How should you start and warm up a group?

At the start – the moderator’s introduction

As moderator you are in a position of power at the start of the group. Respondents will listen keenly. They are disadvantaged; they don’t know each other and they don’t know what is going to happen. There will be an element of social comparison – they will be wondering if they will fit in with the group, if they will be able to answer the questions, make their point of view heard.

So this is a chance to inform, reduce anxieties, set the rules of engagement, explain roles, explain about the topic, as well as repeating Code of Conduct and Data Protection information about how the group or interview is going to be used, anonymity, their rights not to answer and leave at any time. It also sets the tone of the group, should be welcoming and (usually) informal, respectful and should make the respondents feel like they are the most important people in the world right now. The incentive gets them to come; the chance to be really heard keeps them talking.

Psychology of a good introduction	What you actually say
Sound friendly, warm and competent	<i>Welcome and thanks for coming</i>
Respondents feel more comfortable as they know more about the situation	<i>Introduce yourself, your company, explain purpose of research. Say as much as you can without leading.</i>
It’s OK to criticise, you won’t hurt any feelings; leads to improvements	<i>Independent role</i>
Respondents feel protected, empowered	<i>Code of Conduct, anonymity, right to withdraw (but of course you hope they will love it so much they will stay!)</i>
Your information is very valuable	<i>Reason for recording or viewing / mobiles on quiet please</i>
Set expectations	<i>We will be ‘chatting’ (informal), doing exercises</i>
It’s not a test, researcher is non-judgmental	<i>No right or wrong answers</i>
Not groupthink or the company message	<i>Your personal views matter; you can disagree with others</i>
You can relax. The researcher is expert in process management and will deal with difficult people	<i>Interviewer’s job is to ask questions, manage the time, and move on if necessary. May need to ask some people to stop talking so others can add their opinion</i>
Set an appropriate tone for the subject	<i>Be serious / be creative / be collaborative – model whatever you need</i>
Set norms of conversation	<i>Model the language to be used</i>
We will look after all your needs	<i>Housekeeping issues, refreshments, etc.</i>

You can build an atmosphere of trust through your explanation and introduction.

- Participants are clear about your role, their role and that of the client – if present
- You are there to listen to and value their views
- They are there to contribute in an honest and open manner.
- Emphasise that you don't want to bias results, so you won't be giving any views yourself.

Respondents' introductions

Get them talking as quickly as you can. The easiest way is to go around the group and ask each person to answer 3 simple questions – one of which is their first name! Make sure the other questions are not too challenging,

TIP Notice that what you ask about may well set the tone for the rest of the interview. If you stay on the topic of their job or their role as consumer or user, they will fall into that part of their role identity and stay there. For a more creative interview – put in some unexpected questions that signal you want to get to know the person behind the role e.g.

“If you hadn't become a scientist, what else could you see yourself doing?”

“You say you are ‘just a housewife’ but that really includes an awful lot of things?”

As each person introduces themselves, ask one or two more questions to show your interest, before the talking starts as a group.

Warm up

Continue discussing issues that are background to your main topic, assessing what respondents' initial attitudes are and what influences them. In process terms you are building a group from separate individuals, so when you summarise, **focus on the commonalities**.

Do not repeat going around the group in turn more than twice otherwise the group may settle into that pattern of response.

Aim to get discussion going between members of the group: *“Bill's made an interesting point there. Simon, what do you think? Andy, you look as if you want to disagree with Simon....what does anyone else want to add?”*

What hints and tips are there for moderating?

Don't bury yourself in the topic guide or stand at a flipchart the whole time

Once the group starts your **attention needs to be focused outwards** on everyone in the group. You need to sense their emotions, their levels of interest, who is participating well, who needs encouragement and so on. So keep eye contact with the group as much as you can and look round at everybody. Keep your guide as short as you can – you can always pick up on missed details at the end.

Don't write lots of notes during the group. You cannot build empathy and trust and keep energy going while scribbling away.

Do not ignore the quiet people – encourage them to participate early on

Some people are more introverted, some may need to be invited to speak. Don't assume that a person is quiet because they have nothing to say.

Stay neutral; don't respond to 'pokes'

As the group feel more comfortable, some may try to test the moderator's neutrality by saying something unusual or outrageous – they only watch advertising that has lizards in, for example. Stay unfazed, accept the comment and ask whether anyone else prefers any very specific type of ads?

Control dominance and bad behaviour from the start

Dominance in a group is often expressed by a respondent talking louder and longer than anyone else or giving detailed and expert information. If you do not control this from the start the pattern will get stronger until it's effectively a one or two-person group.

Interrupt the person politely but firmly, praise their contribution and reaffirm that you need to know what everyone thinks.

Bad behaviour will be insulting or upsetting to other members of the group and it's your job to deal with it. Start politely "Can I ask you not to use that sort of language here?" but be aware that your last resort is to ask people to leave.

Support respondents who do have a different point of view

It can be quite brave to be the only person with a different opinion; moderators need to show that is valued, especially if others are being denigrating or using social pressure (a finding in itself). It can be done in a neutral way: "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion - that is one of the rules in this group."

Challenge hothousing and groupthink

Despite your best efforts, the group runs with a topic and becomes obsessed or unbalanced. To check whether this is genuine or just a process effect, the moderator can comment that other groups have said something different – is this group really sure they all hate that shade of blue? It's about giving them an easy way to backtrack and moderate their view.

When the group gets going, back off

Many groups reach a point where they are working on their own. If they stay on topic, you don't need to interfere. Moderating is not about constantly directing.

Signpost the sections and show you are aware of the time, without overt clock watching

Summarise after each major section and indicate what will be coming next. Only at the end can you say, "We have x minutes left and will be finishing soon, so we'll take a chance to review what has happened."

Praise contributions

Every now and again tell the group how well it's going and how interesting it all is to you. Summarising also shows you have remembered accurately. Make the praise general to the group – if you praise specific people and not others you will change the balance of their contributions.

Manage the energy

Groups will begin to flag or get bored if all they do is talk. Include visual and verbal exercises, get people to work in pairs or threes occasionally and change your own energy. If there is space get them to stand up and put post its on flipcharts, create a mapping, or do an energiser that involves movement. (It must all appear to be relevant to the topic)

You will find that if you speed up the group will follow. For long groups consider having a break halfway through. Equally if a group is working too fast for sensitive and thoughtful material, slow yourself down. Watch your own body language and tone of voice. If you sound tired and uninterested, they will be too.

Give clear instructions for tasks and exercises

If necessary, explain why you want to do a certain exercise. Then explain or demonstrate the process and finally hand out any materials.

Make sure everyone has time to read /annotate everything and talk about what they have done.

If some things are unclear in the stimulus material, make a note of them and ask the group what would help clarify. Avoid trying to explain things yourself or adding too much information – this can lead to bias.

Reflect questions back to the group

If they ask how much it would cost, ask them how much they would expect? Only answer questions immediately if it would derail the research not to. If it is a subject with many specific questions, bring in an independent expert to give the answers so you can keep moderator neutrality.

Create a satisfying ending

You have built up and worked with a group; now you must let them go and pull together what you have learned. So signal you are nearly at the end, check your guide for loose ends, and jointly summarise what the key learnings are. You can go around the group, (mirroring the start) and this time asking what has made an impact on the respondents.

A good finish is: "is there anything you want to say that you have not had a chance to say?"

What questions are most useful for interviewing/ moderating?

1. All forms of **open questions**: *who, what, why, where, when, how?*
2. **Indirect forms of Why**: "*what was it about that.....?*" "*How was it that you.....?*"
3. **Closed questions only** when you need specific information or to close people down – *do/did, is/are, has/was*
4. **Probes or responses** that indicate you are listening and ask the participant to tell you more:

e.g. "*Tell me more about....*" "*Can you elaborate.....?*" "*I wonder what.....*" "*And?*"
"*Would you explain more...?*" "*Can you give me an example?*" "*What else is there...?*"
"*Can you describe that for me?*" "*What makes you say that?*"

5. **Prompts** – to remind the participant of something or bring in information that was missed out e.g. *“What about other brands?” “You mentioned X earlier, what about that? “I notice you haven’t mentioned...”*
6. Questions about the **importance and value** of something in the participant's life e.g. *“You have mentioned security a couple of times now. Can you tell me about that?” “What is important to you when you?” “ If you didn’t have X, how would your life be different?”*
7. Questions **to clarify meaning** – *“What kind of freshness would it give you?” “when you said ‘convenient’, what exactly do you mean by that?” “What does ‘confidence’ meant to you” “How would you know somebody had ‘integrity?’*
8. Ways of understanding **specific details** or the ‘taken for granted: *“How specifically do you....” “What steps are involved in.....” “What would you see, feel and hear if you were ‘happy’?”*
9. **Narrative questions** to open people up, tell you their story from their point of view: *“Tell me about getting to the station.....” “What was the story behind that choice?” “How did you come to be in that situation?”*
10. **Deep dive questions** to explore feelings: *“If I could get inside your head.....” “What kind of (feeling/ experience)was it?” “Is it like anything else you have come across before?” And when you say, ‘it was curiosity’, what kind of curiosity was that?”*
11. You can also ask **hypothetical, ideal, comparing and contrasting, summary and devil’s advocate questions**. With the last one, say *“just to be devil’s advocate for a moment”* to signal you are moving out of your neutral position as researcher.
12. **Projective questions** – e.g. asking why ‘other people’ might indulge in a socially unacceptable behaviour makes it safer to answer. *“Why do you think some people might post hurtful comments online?” “Why do some people deliberately not pay their fares on the railways?”*
13. **Social reference group questions** – about groups the participant is a member of, wants to be a member of and would prefer to deny being a member of. (Associative, Aspirational, Dissociative groups) *“What kind of people are vegan/ drive a Bentley/ watch a lot of soaps....”*

What can you ask about if you are doing observational research?

(Assuming it's not pure observation, and you can interact with them).

1. **The space and use of space:** How do people interact with the space? Why that pattern? Why are some spaces over or under-used? What is the quality and atmosphere of various parts of the space?
2. **The people:** Who are they and what are they doing? How are they communicating and interacting? What might be the 'rules' or patterns of interaction? What emotions might be involved?
3. **Tools/ Things:** What things or parts of things are they using? What role do these play? What do they enable them to do? What ways do they have of using the things? What steps are there in using them?
4. **Results and reasons:** What happened? What was achieved? What appears to be the purpose of the activity? Why those tools?
5. **Other:** What is being repeated? What could be done better? What were they really doing? What is on view and what is hidden away?
6. *"I noticed....."* is a very valuable and non-judgmental way of asking about anything you observed.

What are useful questions to ask when doing analysis?

1. What can you read between the lines? What is your intuition about what happened? What does it tell you about participants experience or reactions?
2. What does this having this behaviour/ product/ service mean to the participant?
3. To what extent might any finding be a product of the group dynamic/research approach?
4. What positions were people taking in the research? How did they want to be seen by you and significant others in their lives?
5. What patterns / themes/ categories are there in the research and how do they fit together?
6. What is relevant to the research issue and what is outside the scope?
7. What is the story? Who or what is the protagonist? And the antagonists? What is the plot? How does the protagonist overcome?
8. What is emotional, social or cultural? Is there a framework that already encompasses these?
9. Which of your findings/observations can be moved by marketing levers?
10. What recommendation is going to fit best with the clients thinking/ abilities/ culture?

What are the common mistakes in moderating research groups?

1. Rushing the introduction because 'it's not important'
2. Answering respondent questions about the moderator's opinion
3. Setting or allowing rigid response patterns in the group to form
4. Remaining the focal point of the discussion and not encouraging respondents to talk to each other.
5. Leaving it too late to control more dominant respondents and encourage quiet ones to talk
6. Not summarising what respondents have said
7. Confusing the questions 'what do you think about that?' with 'what do you feel about that?'
8. Using a series of closed questions
9. Using phrases like 'would you say that.....' (except when checking the meaning of what a respondent has said)
10. Putting several questions into one
11. Following the one question - one answer principle – not looking around the room to see who else agrees, disagrees or wants to comment
12. Using marketing or research language and not listening to respondents' language
13. Not allowing enough time for respondents to think before they answer
14. Saying you will come back to a respondents' point later and not doing it
15. Spending too much time on the warm up and too little on unravelling the key issues
16. Asking people to answer questions or do tasks that go beyond the limits of their memory/ their competence
17. Not stopping long enough to probe key issues or 'fat' words in enough detail
18. Avoiding conflict; not managing difficult behaviour in the group
19. Not noticing respondents' levels of physical and psychological comfort or discomfort / dissonance between what they say and their facial expression/body language
20. Having so many questions that there is not time to explore or consider the significance of new learnings