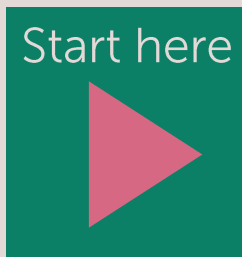




Conducting focus groups with stakeholders

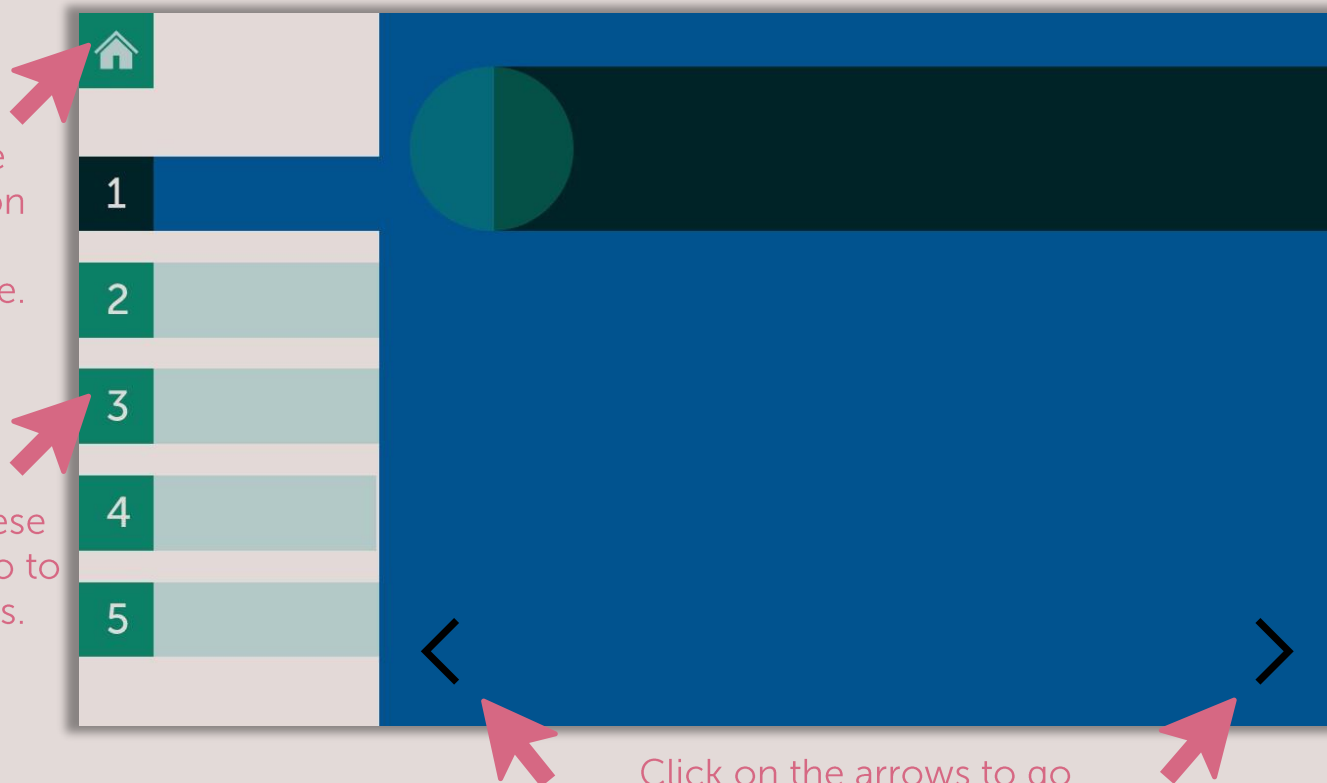




How it works



This module is presented as an interactive PDF, providing you with a seamless navigation experience. You can easily move to different topics by simply clicking on them. In addition to the visible navigation buttons on the side of each page, you will also find clickable sections within the module. These clickable sections are identified within the text.



Click on the home button to return to the first slide.

Click on these blocks to go to the chapters.

Click on the arrows to go to the previous or next page in a chapter



You also have the option to view this PDF in a continuous scrolling mode if you prefer.





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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this module, you can:

1

Define what a focus group is.

2

Describe how to set up a focus group.

3

Explain how to conduct a focus group.

4

List important considerations to keep in mind while conducting a focus group.





1. WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?





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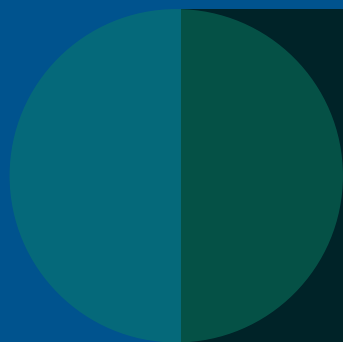
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WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?



Focus groups are a **qualitative research method** used to gather information from a group of individuals simultaneously. This entails an unstructured but guided discussion regarding a specific topic.





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WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?



Focus groups are a **qualitative research method** used to gather information from a group of individuals simultaneously. This entails an unstructured but guided discussion regarding a specific topic.



A focus group is led by a **moderator**, whose role goes beyond merely posing questions and receiving direct answers.





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WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?



Focus groups are a **qualitative research method** used to gather information from a group of individuals simultaneously. This entails an unstructured but guided discussion regarding a specific topic.



A focus group is led by a **moderator**, whose role goes beyond merely posing questions and receiving direct answers.



The goal is to **encourage participants** to elaborate on their ideas, exchange viewpoints, and reflect on their shared experiences.





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WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?



The setup of a focus group encourages **natural conversations about how each person views** the topic of interest.

Participants often dive into topics started by others in an interactive way. **Moderators can ask follow-up questions and explore new avenues** based on what participants are saying. This is unlike surveys or highly structured interviews, which don't have the flexibility to explore new paths of discussion.





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WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?



The setup of a focus group encourages **natural conversations about how each person views** the topic of interest.

Participants often dive into topics started by others in an interactive way. **Moderators can ask follow-up questions and explore new avenues** based on what participants are saying. This is unlike surveys or highly structured interviews, which don't have the flexibility to explore new avenues of discussion.



A focus group typically lasts an hour and includes about **four to six participants**, to ensure that everyone has time to participate. The **moderator** is usually a researcher or an outsider who is curious about the topic.





2. WHY IS IT BENEFICIAL TO USE FOCUS GROUPS?





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WHY IS IT BENEFICIAL TO USE FOCUS GROUPS?

When is it beneficial to use this research method?

Focus groups are appropriate in situations where:

- Groups of participants have **similar experiences**.
- You want **diverse perspectives** on a topic.
- You want qualitative data with **rich information** about the participants' experiences.
- You have the time and resources to work with **small groups** (four to six participants).
- Participants can commit **an hour** to the session.

In the next slides we will explore the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups.





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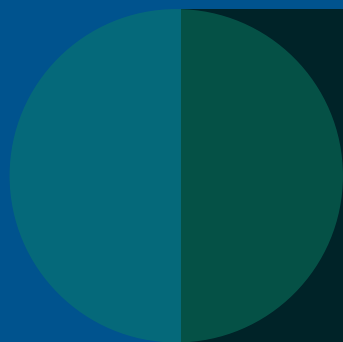
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WHY IS IT BENEFICIAL TO USE FOCUS GROUPS?

When is it beneficial to use this research method?

In the next slides we will explore the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups.





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Advantages of focus groups

Sensitive topics



Focus groups create a **comfortable environment** in which participants can **openly discuss** sensitive topics. As participants interact, they share detailed insights. Since focus groups mimic real conversations, individuals use their natural words and expressions, avoiding the need for 'right' terms.





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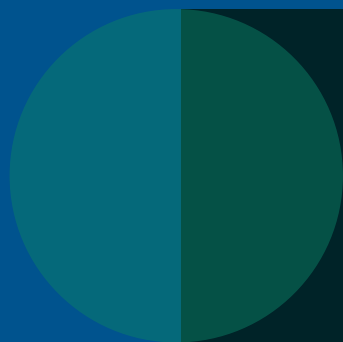
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Advantages of focus groups

Underrepresented groups



Researchers have found that focus groups are helpful in discussing sensitive matters with **children and adolescents**, reducing discomfort. Focus groups are also useful for **hearing from underrepresented groups**. Talking with peers can be less intimidating than talking only with one interviewer.





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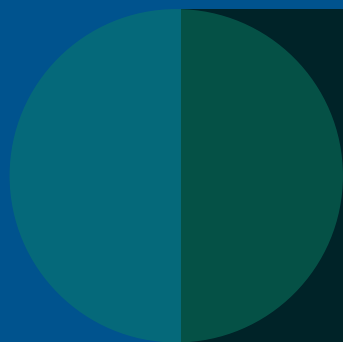
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Advantages of focus groups

Social change



Focus groups are useful for research aimed at social change, such as community-based participatory research and action research. Group discussions can **raise awareness and spark personal change** through meaningful reflection and insight.





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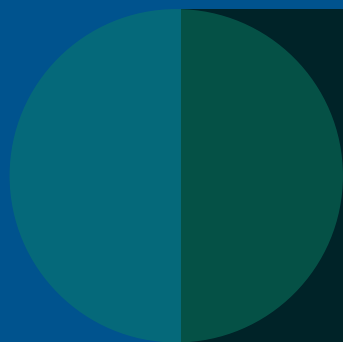
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Advantages of focus groups

Empowerment



Focus groups **empower participants** by showing them that they are not alone in their views and that they are listened to. Participation can lead to empowerment and strengthened social connections, making focus groups and other participatory research methods an important tool for creating a positive societal impact.





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Advantages of focus groups

Other advantages of focus groups



- Good for gathering new knowledge about lesser-known topics.
- Flexibility to explore unexpected new topics.
- Access to interaction and meaning-making processes, allowing participants to build on each other's responses.
- Allows to understand multiple perspectives on a topic, including points of agreement and disagreement.





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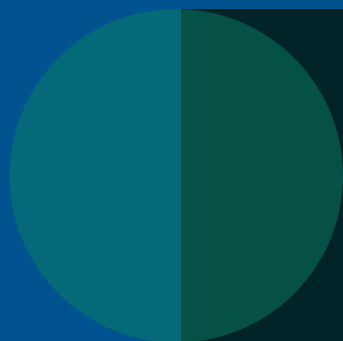
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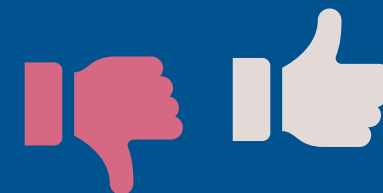
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Disadvantages of focus groups

Disadvantages of focus groups



As with other research methods, there are also disadvantages to using focus groups. Among them:

- Limited in-depth tracking of individual viewpoints.
- Time consuming for both participants and the moderator.
- Time consuming to transcribe data.
- Risk of groupthink.
- Risk of quieter participants being overshadowed by active participants.





3. HOW TO SET UP FOCUS GROUPS?





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HOW TO SET UP FOCUS GROUPS?



Timing



Introduction letter



Participants



Protocol



Location



Equipment

To set up a focus group there are certain elements to take into account.

Click on the icons to learn more about these elements.





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Timing



When planning focus groups, avoid busy periods for scheduling and consider the incentives you will provide participants—cash, book vouchers, information, or a learning experience. Also, consider the number of groups you will need.

Remember that focus groups usually take longer than expected. **Allow plenty of time and inform participants of the time commitment.** Add at least half an hour to the scheduled session time to allow for possible delays and extended discussions. Prevent participants from having to leave early.





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Introduction letter



To align participants' expectations, send them a consistent introductory letter or email. This message should clarify their role, emphasize the importance of the project, mention that the discussion will be recorded, and promise confidentiality.

The **informed consent**, which is the agreement of participants to take part in the focus group, should be attached to the information letter. It is essential to obtain a **signed consent form from each participant** prior to the start of the focus group to comply with the ethical standards of research. For guidance on what to include in the form, refer to the module on drafting informed consent.





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Participants



Considering the goals of your project, **select participants based on relevant demographics and perspectives.**

Smaller groups are more effective for rich discussions and work well for sensitive topics. Larger groups can be challenging to manage and may have participants who are less engaged.

Should group members be similar or different? This raises a debate:





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Participants



Homogenous groups can foster comfort and shared perspectives, but they can also risk groupthink and limited diversity of opinions.

Heterogeneous groups, on the other hand, can generate more diverse viewpoints, fostering a broader understanding of the topic. However, they can also create tensions and require skillful moderation.





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Participants



The choice between homogeneity and heterogeneity depends on the project goals. To find balance, consider forming focus groups in which **participants share a common experience but are diverse in terms of gender, political positions, and cultural backgrounds, among other characteristics.**

[Click here for an example](#)





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Participants



Example

Homogeneity of age is particularly important in non-Western countries, where younger people may feel that it is disrespectful for them to make comments that differ from those made by their elders.

Homogeneous groups are important when investigating sensitive topics, such as drug use among adolescents, where people who differ too much in their knowledge/experience with drugs may stifle the discussion and lead to a struggle for control among the participants (e.g., one or more participants trying to dominate the discussion).



return





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Protocol



It is useful to write out a **focus group protocol**, not only because there is a lot to remember, but also to ensure consistency if you are conducting multiple focus groups.





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Protocol



The protocol can be seen as **a map to chart the flow of the focus group**. In many ways, it is similar to an interview guide: it covers the range of topics you want the participants to discuss, and the questions should be clear, concise, precise, and ask about only one topic. However, unlike an interview guide, the questions in a focus group protocol act as **prompts to elicit general discussion**: you want questions that stimulate participants to respond and to agree and disagree with each other, rather than simply to respond to the moderator.





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Protocol



The focus group protocol should include the following phases:

1. Welcome and an introduction with an overview of the topic.
2. Establish ground rules and confidentiality.
3. Asking questions (moving from general experiences to specific issues and from most important to "less important").
4. Wrap-up including final questions, thanking the participants and indicating next steps.





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Location



The choice of location should be based on **convenience for participants**. Choosing an appropriate location involves balancing your needs (secure, quiet) with the participants' preferences (accessibility, travel time).

Focus groups can also be conducted **online**, although it can be more difficult to create an interactive and spontaneous conversation. Using tools like Zoom or Teams makes it easy to connect participants from different locations.





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Equipment



Before scheduling your first focus group, evaluate the **technology** you will need to **record** the discussion. Consider handheld recorders, your cell phone, or computer software.

There are **many options** for recording and transcribing audio and video. Video calling platforms such as Zoom and Webex have built-in recording and live captioning capabilities. In addition, services such as Otter.ai, Rev.com, and even Microsoft 365 offer transcription solutions for both video and audio recordings.





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Equipment



It is an ethical consideration to agree with the participants for **how long you will keep the recording** of the focus group to conduct your analysis, and afterwards make sure to **erase** it from your device.

Focus groups often address issues that require innovative solutions. Therefore, **additional materials** may be needed. For example, flashcards or post-it notes can be useful to help participants organize their ideas.





4. HOW TO CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS?





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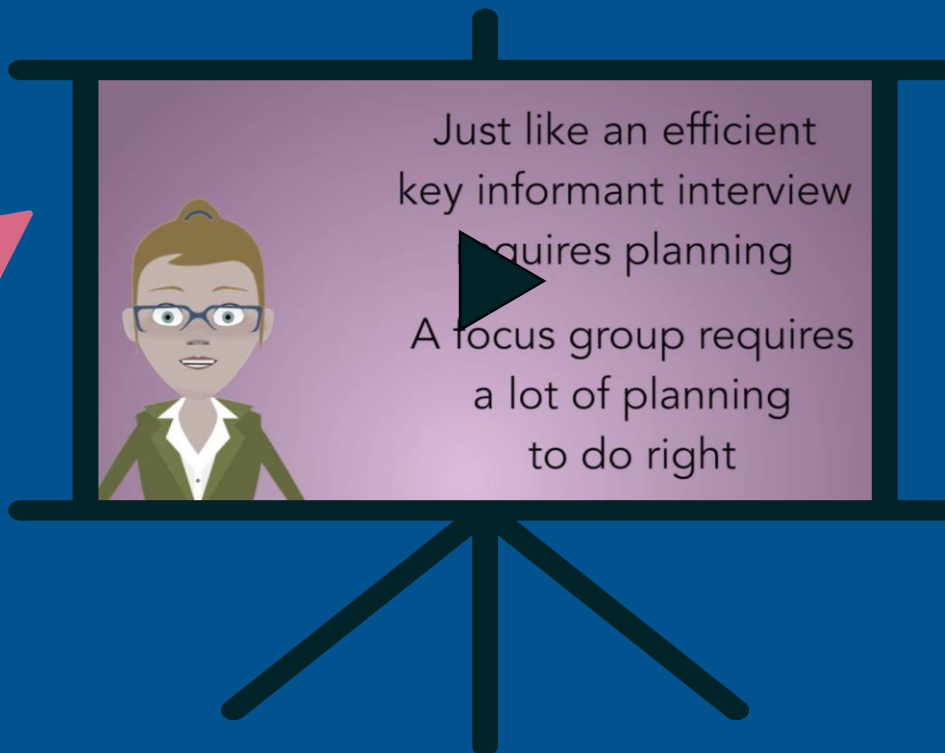
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HOW TO CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS?

Click on the video to play it in your browser and discover **how you can conduct a focus group.**





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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Starting the focus group



As participants arrive, it is possible to offer refreshments and engage in casual conversation. If necessary, provide name tags and inform the participants of restroom locations. Allow participants to choose their seats. Greet and introduce participants as they arrive. Prepare the recording equipment.

During the focus group

Closing the focus group



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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Starting the focus group



Once everyone is gathered, it is time to start the group. Start with a friendly greeting, followed by a **clear explanation of the session's progression**. Introduce yourselves and specify your roles: who will moderate and who will observe while taking notes. **Obtain consent, collect demographic information if necessary, and establish discussion rules**. These steps should be completed before activating the recording equipment.

During the focus group

Closing the focus group



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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

During the focus group



Initiate the discussion by **asking open-ended questions** pertaining to the topic of the conversation. Foster participant involvement, prompting them to share their thoughts and experiences in a respectful way. If needed, tactfully **steer the discussion back to the intended topic.**

Closing the focus group



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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

During the focus group



If some participants are less talkative than others, **try to engage them by soliciting their opinions on specific topics.** When participants give brief answers, follow up with **additional probing questions** to delve more deeply into their experiences and viewpoints. This could reveal more valuable insights.

If you are taking notes, **observe the participants' responses and nonverbal cues.** Make sure to take notes of any significant themes, trends or quotes.

Closing the focus group



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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Closing the focus group



Once the discussion has concluded, express **gratitude** to the participants for their time and the valuable contributions they have made. Inform them about the **next steps** in the process, which may include surveys or individual interviews. Offer them an opportunity to ask any **questions** they may have about the project or research. Make sure that participants have all information to contact you, in case they have questions later or if they don't want to take part in research anymore. Ensure that you have all **consent forms and relevant information** before the participants leave.



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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Closing the focus group



Once the participants have left, take some time to **debrief with your group**. Discuss the primary takeaways, observations, and initial impressions derived from the focus group.

You can express gratitude to the participants once again via a thank-you email or message and **keep them informed about the project progress**. Following this, transcribing the recorded discussion and analyzing the collected data will commence.





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HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

Final tips



- Respect the agreed duration with the participants. If extra time is necessary, ask if they are willing to remain longer.
- Engage in dialogue, rather than providing only one-way responses.
- Embrace diverse perspectives and disagree respectfully.
- Refrain from talking over each other to facilitate transcription.
- As a moderator, ask for clarifications if you do not fully understand the idea a participant is trying to communicate. This is a great way to elicit deeper explanations.
- Trust your curiosity! Dig deeper into topics that spark your interest.





5. HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?





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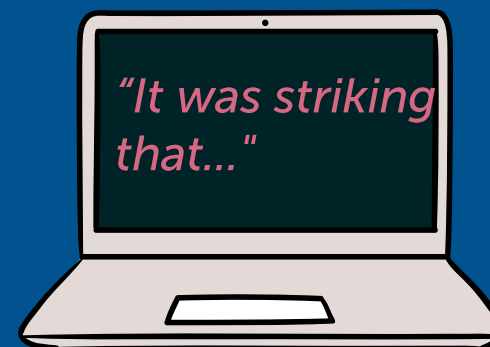
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HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?

What to focus on when analyzing the focus group data?

Any formal analysis of focus group data should incorporate a summary of:

- Most prominent themes.
- Significant quotations.
- Any surprising discoveries.





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HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?

The **main goal** of the analysis is to extract the main topics and ideas raised in the conversation, including relevant quotes. When identifying themes from the focus groups, it is essential to consider the **comprehensiveness, intensity, and specificity** of comments, and to assign more significance to such quotes.



You can efficiently **handle your data electronically** using a qualitative data-management tool like ATLAS.ti or NVivo. These software programs make it easier to assign codes to each emerging theme, count the frequency of the codes, and establish relationships between them.





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HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?

Two important aspects to consider regarding your focus group data:

Agreement / disagreement

Look for issues with general consensus and treat them as general findings. However, issues with disagreement are equally important and can be quite intriguing. Explain the varying viewpoints and the disagreement.

Opinion shift

Since the focus group is an interactive forum, it is plausible that opinions may transform as the session proceeds. However, subjective evaluations should be avoided, and a logical progression of information should be maintained. Therefore, the discussion's evolution should be objectively described while sticking to clear and concise language.





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HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?

How to report focus group findings?

When reporting your findings, it is important **to provide as much detail as possible without revealing participants' identities**. You may opt to use pseudonyms or assign a number to each participant. In settings of small organizations, where individuals may be easily identifiable from opinions shared, preserving anonymity is particularly vital.





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HOW TO ANALYSE FOCUS GROUP DATA?

How to report focus group findings?

Incorporating **quotes** that highlight primary findings using participants' direct language is beneficial.

Above all, **remaining true to your data** is essential. Sometimes an idea may appear interesting to you and your team, but it is important to ensure that it is grounded in the participants' story.





6. FINAL STEPS





Literature

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Reading tips

- [A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research](#)





About this e-module

AUTHORS

The content of this module was developed by [Dr. Crystal Smit](#) Assistant Professor (project lead) and [Denise Levy](#), learning innovator, both from the Erasmus University Rotterdam

CONTEXT

This e-module is intended to be used in impact-driven courses where students collaborate with external stakeholders such as non-profit organizations, municipalities, health institutions, youth initiatives, schools, and others.

DESIGN

The instructional design of this e-module was developed by Akke van der Laan, Learning & Development Expert at L&D talents. The graphic design is done by [Risbo](#).

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**Impact
at the
Core**



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