

**Simple Steps to Effective Focus Groups**  
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**Focus Group Text**

The UW-Stout Applied Research Center offers graduate certificates in Evaluation Studies and Institutional Research. A Focus Group module within the certificates use the *Focus Group Workbook* (developed by the ARC). The workbook covers an overview of the focus group method, how to prepare for conducting focus groups, tasks involved in conducting the groups, and how to complete the focus group project. Examples and templates for many related documents are provided within the text.

To purchase a copy of the Focus Group Workbook, search "Focus Group Workbook Lulu".



## **Focus Group Ground Rules**

It's important to establish ground rules at the beginning of a group. You may want to have them created before you go into the group or you may want to ask the group to create them. (NOTE: this can be time-consuming and we don't recommend it, but you may have groups that require this kind of hands-on participation in the process.) Generally, the ground rules are given by the facilitator during the introduction.

Some points to include:

- There are no right answers – everyone's opinion is important.
- There's no expectation of consensus – people can disagree, but respectfully.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Language – you may want to ask the group about this – some people are offended by profane/obscene language, while others aren't. If the group determines that it should not be used, it will be the role of the facilitator to remind speakers of that.
- The facilitator will be encouraging everyone to participate, but no one is required to speak.
- If someone wishes to end their participation, they should feel free to get up and leave without disrupting the group.

## The Probe and Pause Focus Group Techniques:

These techniques are used when the facilitator wants to either gain more detail on a comment by a participant or to gain additional points of view from participants. Adding a prompt can also be useful.

Using the pause, prompt and probe techniques in conjunction can yield richer information from your participants.

### Ask your question

- Pause for five seconds

### Prompt

- Prompts will clarify understanding of the the question
- Prompts often begin with "for example..."
- Pause five seconds again

### Probe

- Once someone has answered a question, determine if you need to probe (probably)
- Probes ask participants to provide more detail about their reponse

## **Guiding the Group: What Happens When the Focus Group Gets “Stuck”?**

There may be instances in a focus group when a question is going nowhere, but continues to eat up time. This can happen for many different reasons, including:

- **Dominant talkers:** This topic is covered elsewhere, but when one person dominates the conversation, that person’s point of view will be all that is coming out of the conversation.
- **Circular arguments:** This occurs when two or more people are arguing a point, but they are no longer addressing the subject.
- **Off-topic:** This occurs when a discussion is taking place, but it’s not about the question that was asked.

It is the responsibility of the facilitator to stop the conversation and put it back on track. However, this must be done without offending the people who are talking or alienating the group.

We recommend the following:

- In these situations, the facilitator should remind the focus group of the current question or move on to the next question if sufficient comments were made.
- Acknowledge that there are strong feelings about the topic but it is necessary to move on to get through the questions.
- Let the participants know that you are “parking” the item for now. This can be done by writing it down on a flip chart or board if one is available, or by asking the note taker to record it. Let them know that, if time permits, you can return to the discussion after the other questions are answered.

## Handling Unexpected Obstacles During Focus Groups

### What to do for unexpected/problems:

- **Weather:** phone/email each participant letting them know of the cancellation and the rescheduled date/time/location
- **Unexpected people show up:** These individuals are politely asked to leave. The participants of the focus group are likely to have been selected for a reason and from a specific population. Also, as the facilitator, it becomes hard to manage groups that become larger than 6-8 participants. It is always beneficial to bring a list of the participants and their contact information.
- **Participants who want to leave:** Allow them to do so. The note taker should accompany them and, once outside the room, ask if the participant needs to be put in contact with someone else (Counseling center, Healthcare providers, etc.)
- **Participants becoming emotional:** Allow them to continue as long as they are staying on topic and are speaking rationally/coherently. If they totally break down, suggest that the note taker step outside the room with the participant until they regain their composure. They may or may not want to continue with the group at that point. If there is no note taker, the facilitator should excuse him/herself from the group, step outside with the participant, and telephone for assistance. Find the participant a quiet place to sit. Reassure them that someone is coming soon and go back to the group. Let them know they are free to return to the group or excuse themselves as they wish. If there is a conflict between participants, do not allow it to escalate. Step in quickly and acknowledge the difference in opinion, and remind them of the ground rules for the group. Ask others in the group for their opinion. If this appears to be polarizing the group, drop the topic and move on to the next question.

## **Focus Group Time Management**

Managing time throughout the focus group is key to getting useful information to every research question. Have the note-taker keep you on track with time indicators for each question to keep you moving through each question in an effective manner.

However, if you do not have enough time to answer your remaining questions we recommend the following:

- Briefly answer each question, allotting X number of minutes for the following questions. Let participants know that they can give more feedback using a comment card or email. Go through the remaining questions, with the note-taker cuing you when it's time to move on. You may not get much from the group from this point on – once you've introduced the time element, they may disengage from the process.
- Choose most important questions to your research. Have participants answer these questions in a detailed fashion and dismiss the less important questions. Also, consider which questions have been well answered in previous focus group sessions. If some have already been thoroughly answered, move on to the less answered questions.
- Never take a group past their allotted time.