

Categories of Questions

Overview

Opening Question
Introductory Questions
Transition Questions
Key Questions
Ending Questions
Putting the Parts Together

Different types of questions are used at different times during the focus group. Each type of question has a distinct purpose. Typically, a focus group will contain each type of question. A key feature of focus group research is that not all questions are equal. Some questions are trivial and exist only as a prelude to a more important question. Other questions are of the utmost importance. The level of importance influences the amount of time spent on the question as well as the intensity of the analysis. Not all questions are analyzed in the same way. Some questions, such as the opening question, may not be analyzed at all. The moderator may move through some questions rapidly, whereas other questions will need a leisurely discussion.

Essentially there are five categories of questions, each with a distinctive function in the flow of a focus group interview. We call these question categories: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending. For the sake of thoroughness, these questions are presented as a questioning route, not as a topic guide.



KEY POINT

**Some Questions
Are More
Important
Than Others**

Categories of Questions

<i>Question Type</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
<i>Opening</i>	<i>Participants get acquainted and feel connected</i>
<i>Introductory</i>	<i>Begins discussion of topic</i>
<i>Transition</i>	<i>Moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions</i>
<i>Key</i>	<i>Obtains insight on areas of central concern in the study</i>
<i>Ending</i>	<i>Helps researchers determine where to place emphasis and brings closure to the discussion</i>



**Remember the
Big Idea of the
Categories**

We offer these five categories of questions merely as suggestions—not as ironclad rules. These categories are intended to be used as general guidelines, not absolute strategy. The major contribution of the categories is helping the researcher sequence and bring focus to the questions. Novice moderators tend to move too quickly into key questions, and the premature discussion of these can miss critical concepts. Often, the questions can be improved by using these principles. If you are a beginning moderator, give careful thought to these categories. If you are an experienced moderator, you might use these categories as diagnostic aids when your questioning strategy isn't working as well as you'd like.



EXAMPLE

**Insights Into
Successful
Community
Heart Health
Programs**

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|---------------------|--|
| <i>Opening</i> | 1. Tell us your name and where you live. |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 2. Describe a healthy person. |
| <i>Transition</i> | 3. When you think of Heart Health, what comes to mind? |
| <i>Transition</i> | 4. Think back to the past several years. Have you made any changes in your diet, exercise, or personal habits? Tell us about them. |
| <i>Key</i> | 5. What prompted these changes?
FOLLOW-UP:
Friends, family, and neighbors
Written information
Media messages
Medical advice
Physical health
Personal desire to change |
| <i>Key</i> | 6. Which of those mentioned was most influential? |
| <i>Key</i> | 7. Tell us about the things you tried to do but discontinued; the changes you tried to make but were not successful. |
| <i>Ending</i> | 8. We are trying to help people make healthy changes. What advice do you have for us? |

Let's consider each of these types of focus group questions in more detail.

Opening Question

Everyone answers the opening question at the beginning of the focus group. It is designed to be answered quickly (usually in about 30 seconds) and to make people feel comfortable by identifying characteristics that participants have in common. Usually it is preferable for these questions to be based on facts as opposed to attitudes or opinions of participants. Questions of attitude or opinion take time to answer, require examples or stories, and beg for discussion. The opening question is not a discussion question but strictly a process to encourage everyone to talk early in the group. Attitude and opinion questions are better placed later in the focus group discussion.

The opening question is usually not intended to obtain useful information for the study. Indeed, some factual information that might seem easy and fast to obtain can actually work against you—such as educational level, size of business, professional qualifications, etc. Questions intended to elicit such information emphasize how people are different from one another, as opposed to how they are alike. The only condition when these might be used is when the moderator knows ahead of time with great confidence that all respondents will give similar answers. More often, this type of demographic information is requested in a short written “registration form” or “background survey” when participants arrive at the focus group site if it is really needed.

Opening questions are typically not analyzed. The intent of the question is to establish a sense of community in the group in terms of how participants feel after they've heard responses from others. One of the best opening questions that I've heard was asked of a group of dentists. It was: “Tell us who you are, where you practice dentistry, and what you most enjoy doing when you're not practicing dentistry.” The question established that all of the participants had dentistry in common and that they were practitioners and human beings with interests, hobbies, and families.



EXAMPLE

Opening Questions

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- *"Tell us your name, where you practice dentistry, and what you most enjoy doing when you're not practicing dentistry."*
 - *"Tell us who you are, where you live, and your favorite memory of last summer."*
 - *"Tell us your name and tell us about a gift that was memorable to you. This gift could have been one that you've either given or received. It could have been recent or long ago."*
 - *"Tell us your name and one thing you'd like us to know about your child—one thing that your child does that makes you smile."*
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Introductory Questions

Introductory questions introduce the general topic of discussion and/or provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on experiences and their connection with the overall topic. The questions foster conversation and interaction among the participants but are not critical to analysis.

While the opening question gets participants to talk, it is the introductory question that begins the focus on the topic. Typically, this is an open-ended question that allows participants to tell about how they see or understand the phenomenon under investigation. The question could ask for a definition, an explanation, or an overview of how people have experienced a product or service. Sometimes, the introductory question asks participants to remember when they first experienced or encountered the organization or topic under investigation. This introductory question begins to give the moderator clues about the participants' reality. It is sometimes helpful to reweave these clues into the discussion later in the focus group. Occasionally, participants will offer answers to introductory questions that are completely unanticipated. These unique insights may lead to additional probing or follow-up questions.



EXAMPLE

Introductory Questions

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- *"When you hear the words customer service, what comes to mind?"*
 - *"What's your first impression of the Minnesota Extension Service?"*
 - *"What persuaded you to join the agency?"*
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Transition Questions

Transition questions move the conversation toward the key questions that drive the study. The transition questions help participants envision the topic in a broader scope. They serve as the logical link between the introductory questions and the key questions. During these questions the participants are becoming aware of how others view the topic. These questions set the stage for productive key questions.

Often, transition questions ask participants to go into more depth than introductory questions about their experiences and use of a product. While the introductory question brings the topic to the surface, the transition questions make the connection between the participant and the topic of investigation.

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- *"How have you been involved with community education?"*
 - *"Tell us about courses you've had to improve your skills."*
 - *"What are the benefits of working in this agency?"*
-



EXAMPLE

**Transition
Questions**

Key Questions

Key questions drive the study. Typically, there are two to five questions in this category. These are usually the first questions to be developed by the research team and the ones that require the greatest attention in the analysis.

It's crucial for the moderator to know which questions are key questions. The moderator needs to allow sufficient time for a full discussion of these questions. Although only a few minutes might be allocated for each of the earlier questions, the key questions may need as much as 10 or 15 minutes each. Furthermore, the moderator will likely need to use pauses and probes more frequently with key questions. Key questions usually begin about one third to one half of the way into the focus group.



**For More
Information on
the Usefulness
of Pauses, See
Chapter 4 of
*Moderating
Focus Groups***



Key Questions

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- *"Tell me about the things you tried to do but discontinued; the changes you tried to make but were not successful."*
 - *"What role did others have in your success?"*
 - *"What helped you continue the change?"*
 - *"What would get you to participate in this program?"*
 - *"Suppose you were trying to encourage a friend to participate in this program. What would you say?"*
-

Ending Questions

These questions bring closure to the discussion, enable participants to reflect on previous comments, and are critical to analysis. These questions can be of three types: the all-things-considered question, the summary question, and the final question.

All-Things-Considered Questions

At the end of the focus group, you may use a question that allows participants to state their final position on critical areas of concern. We call this the "all-things-considered" question. It allows each participant to reflect on all comments shared in the discussion and then to identify which aspects are most important, most in need of action, etc. Also, individuals may have shared inconsistent points of view, and this question allows them to clarify their position at the conclusion of the discussion. Often, this question is answered by each person in the group.



All-Things-Considered Questions

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- *"Suppose you had one minute to talk to the governor on the topic of merit pay. What would you say?"*
 - *"Of all the needs we discussed, which one is most important to you?"*
 - *"Jot down on a piece of paper one phrase or one sentence that best describes your position on this topic."*
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This type of question is helpful in analysis because it is used to interpret conflicting comments and assign weight to what was said. Sometimes, trivial concerns are talked about with frequency, and it's a serious mistake for the analyst to assume that frequency reflects importance. If the analyst wants to know what partici-

pants consider important, then that question must be explicitly asked of participants, ideally as an ending question.

Summary Question

The summary question is asked after the moderator or assistant moderator has given a short oral summary (2 or 3 minutes) of the key questions and the big ideas that emerged from the discussion. After the summary, the participants are asked about the adequacy of the summary. This question also plays a critical role in analysis.

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- "Is this an adequate summary?"
 - "Did I correctly describe what was said?"
 - "How well does that capture what was said here?"
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1. Before the focus group, be sure you know the key questions and the approximate time the moderator plans to spend on each key question.
 2. Be clear in your mind about the purpose of the focus group. The summary should tie closely to this purpose.
 3. Take notes with two things in mind: first, notes that will help you provide a brief oral summary and, second, notes for your detailed analysis after the focus group.
 4. Begin your oral summary with the most important findings, regardless of when they were discussed in the focus group. Don't worry about the question sequence when you construct your summary.
 5. Begin your summary with findings—what was actually said. Attempt to capture common themes but also acknowledge differing points of view. This descriptive summary repeats what was said but is very brief. After you've given the summary of what was said, consider offering an interpretation. The interpretive summary attaches additional meaning and goes beyond the actual words.
 6. Listen for what was not said but might have been expected. If these areas are important, then in the summary you might say, "Some things were not mentioned like . . . and I am assuming they are not important." Look at the participants while you're saying this and watch for reactions.
 7. Cite key phrases used in the discussion. This demonstrates connectedness and careful listening.
 8. Keep the summary to 3 minutes or less. If you ramble on, people will tune out.
 9. When finished, look at the participants and ask, "Is this summary complete?" or "Does this sound OK to you?"
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**Chapter 4 of
Moderating Focus
Groups has more
information on the
use of pauses**



EXAMPLE

**Summary
Questions**



**How to Give an
Oral Summary at
the End of the
Focus Group**

Final Question

The final question in a focus group is an “insurance question.” Its unique purpose is to ensure that critical aspects have not been overlooked. The question begins with a short overview of the purpose of the study. This overview may be slightly longer and more descriptive than what was said in the advance letter or oral introduction to the focus group. Following this overview, the moderator asks the final question: Has anything been missed?



EXAMPLE

Final Questions

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- *“Have we missed anything?”*
 - *“Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn’t?”*
-

For this question to work effectively, there must be sufficient time remaining at the conclusion of the focus group. It is best to have about 10 minutes remaining before the promised adjournment time. This question is particularly important at the beginning of a series of focus groups to ensure that the questioning route is logical and complete. This final question can also be used to get feedback on your moderating skills. If something isn’t working, the participants are often willing to tell you if you ask with a smile and explain that you want to improve. We sometimes explain, “This is the first in a series of groups that we are doing. Do you have any advice on how we can improve?”

Putting the Parts Together

Now let’s put these components together into a set of questions. Here are several examples of focus group questions. The first example is from a not-for-profit organization that wanted to design an educational program to help local residents lower their cholesterol. Before they designed the program, they wanted to find out more about what information people wanted, how they liked to get information, and how to keep people motivated in continuing with cholesterol reduction.

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- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| <i>Opening</i> | 1. Tell us your name and where you live. |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 2. What to you is good health? |
| <i>Transition</i> | 3. What to you is a healthy lifestyle? |
| <i>Key</i> | 4. Think back to the last time you wanted to make a change relating to health. It may have been a change in what you eat, your weight, smoking, or exercise habits. What kind of barriers or roadblocks did you run into? |
| <i>Key</i> | 5. What helped you or would have helped you the most in making the change? |
| <i>Transition</i> | 6. Suppose you have been told by your doctor that your cholesterol level is too high. What would you want to know, or what kind of information would you like to get? |
| <i>Key</i> | 7. Some of you mentioned foods and diet. Let's talk about that. What kind of information would you want to get about foods and your diet to help you lower your cholesterol? |
| <i>Key</i> | 8. There are a lot of different ways you could get the types of information you have just been talking about. How would you like to get that information? |
| <i>Key</i> | 9. Of all those ways of getting information, which do you feel is most important? |
| <i>Key</i> | 10. Suppose that a workshop on cholesterol was held. What would get you to attend? |
| <i>Key</i> | 11. We realize that it's hard to stay motivated to learn about things like cholesterol, but what would entice you to come back for more? What would keep you interested? |
| <i>Ending</i> | 12. We are going to be putting together programs for residents on how to lower their cholesterol. As we begin this project, what advice do you have for us? |
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EXAMPLE

Questions on Cholesterol Changes

The second example was used to determine how to develop a community wellness campaign. The results helped experts design workable strategies that were based on past successes.



**Success Factors
in Community
Wellness**

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- Opening* 1. Tell us your first name and your favorite food.
- Introduction* 2. You have been selected because you've made a positive change in your health. Each of you has changed one or more things in your lifestyle. Briefly tell us what you did.
- Transition* 3. Where did you get the idea for the change?
- Key* 4. After you got the idea, did you seek more information?
- Key* 5. What role did others have in your success?
- Key* 6. What slowed you up?
- Key* 7. What helped you continue the change?
- Ending* 8. What advice would you give to others considering the change?
- Ending* 9. We would like to help others become successful in making healthy changes. What advice do you have for us?
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The next example was used to test draft materials in a violence prevention campaign and to obtain suggestions that would make the program successful.



**Pilot Test
Materials and
Strategies**

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- Opening* 1. Tell us who you are and where you live.
- Introduction* 2. What kinds of violence are in the lives of young people?
- Transition* 3. Take a few moments and look over the materials for parents on preventing violence. The first part is a draft copy of a parent guide for preventing violence. The second part includes suggestions for community-based activities.
- PAUSE FOR PARENTS TO REVIEW MATERIALS
- Key* 4. What was your first impression of these materials?
- Key* 5. What one thing do you like the best about these materials?
- Key* 6. What one thing do you like the least?
- Key* 7. Were there any parts of this material that seemed inappropriate?
- Key* 8. Were there any parts of this material that other parents might be concerned about?
- Key* 9. What would get you to participate in this effort?
- Key* 10. Suppose that you were trying to encourage a friend to participate in this program. What would you say?
- Ending* 11. If you could change one thing about the program, what would it be?
- Ending* 12. Do you have any other advice for us as we introduce these new materials or this campaign?
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Phrasing the Questions

Overview

Use Open-Ended Questions
Ask Participants to Think Back

Avoid Asking Why

Keep Questions Simple

Be Cautious About Giving Examples

After brainstorming the topics or questions, the researcher phrases questions in language appropriate for participants. Let's consider the strategies for phrasing questions.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the focus group interview is the open-ended questions. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a focus group without open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow the respondents to determine the direction of the response. The answer is not implied, and the type or manner of response is not suggested. Individuals are encouraged to respond based on their specific situation. The major advantage of the open-ended question is that it reveals what is on the interviewee's mind, as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the



KEY POINT

**Open-Ended
Questions Are
Essential for
Focus Group
Interviews**

interviewee's mind. Closed-ended questions aren't totally off-limits, however. Toward the end of the group interview, it may be productive to narrow the types of responses and bring greater focus to the answers by shifting to closed-ended questions,

Some questions are deceptive and appear to be open-ended but are really closed-ended questions in disguise. Questions that include words like *satisfied*, *to what extent*, or *how much* imply answers that fall within a specified range such as *very satisfied*, *to some extent*, or *a great deal*. These questions are usually used toward the latter part of the interview as the moderator narrows the range of inquiry. Bounding the questions may be helpful to a moderator trying to regain control of a rambling discussion or in situations where the topic requires more specific insights.



Open-Ended Questions

- "What did you think of the program?"
- "How did you feel about the conference?"
- "Where do you get new information?"
- "What do you like best about the proposed program?"

It is possible to add structure by delimiting or bounding the question while still allowing respondents to select their own way of answering, such as:

- "What did you think of the part of the program that described new farming techniques?"
- "How did you feel about Dr. Jones' presentation at the conference?"
- "Where do you get new information on parenting skills?"
- "What do you like best about how the new program is promoted?"
- "Which of these three designs do you like best?"

Ask Participants to Think Back

The "think back" question asks participants to reflect on their personal experiences and then respond to a specific question. "Think back to when you began working at the public health service. What attracted you to the position?" Or, "Think back to the last time you registered for a course at the university. How were you treated?" The "think back" phrase helps establish a context for the response. These words let participants know that you want them to be specific and grounded in their experiences, as opposed to repeating "hearsay" from others or just stating community beliefs and values.

There's a tendency for participants to respond to the more immediate interviewing experience—the here and now—unless you ask them to shift themselves to another place in time. This focus on the past increases the reliability of the responses because it asks about specific experiences as opposed to current intentions or future possibilities. The question asks what the person has done as opposed to what might be done in the future. The shift is from what might be, or ought to be, to what has actually been. This time shift cues the respondent to speak from experience, as opposed to wishes and intentions.

Avoid Asking Why

“Why” questions imply a rational answer, one developed by thought and reflection. Unfortunately, these questions present problems, because in real life, people make decisions based on impulse, habit, tradition, or other nonrational processes. When asked “why,” respondents provide answers that seem rational or appropriate to the situation. Unfortunately, the answers received may not be reliable. The answers may sound good, seem reasonable, and, on the surface, appear to be right. In fact, that's why these answers are often given, because they sound good and seem reasonable. The participant has “intellectualized” the answer, speaking from the brain and not from deeper forces that motivate behavior.

Moreover, the “why” question has sharpness or pointedness to it that reminds people of interrogations. This sharpness raises defensive barriers, and the respondent tends to take a position on the socially acceptable side of controversial issues.

If the researcher decides to use a “why” question, it should be specific. Paul Lazarfeld (1986) has called this the principle of specification. Lazarfeld's principle of specification is that such questions are answered in one of two ways. When asked why, the respondent may respond on (1) the basis of “influences” that prompted the action or (2) the basis of certain desirable “attributes.”

Let's use Lazarfeld's model to examine responses to a seemingly simple question: “Why did you go to the zoo?”

Influence Answer: “Because my kids really wanted to go.”

Attribute Answer: “Because I wanted to see the Beluga whale.”

What seems like a straightforward and simple question can really be answered on several dimensions. The first answer de-

scribes an influence, while the second relates to a feature or attribute of the zoo. A preferable strategy is to break the “why” question down into different questions, for example:

Influence: “What prompted (influenced, caused, made) you to go to the zoo?” Or

Attribute: “What features of the zoo do you particularly like?”

A less direct approach is to ask people “what” or “how” they feel about the subject of discussion. Often, people can describe the feelings they had when they considered using a particular product or program. In addition, they can probably describe the anticipated consequences of using the product or program.

Keep Questions Simple

Beginning researchers tend to make focus group questions too complex. Simple questions and clarity of thought are essential. For example, don’t ask, “What are the ingredients that are associated with healthy living?” Instead ask, “Describe a healthy lifestyle.” Think of the shortest way to ask the question clearly. The best focus group questions are simply stated. When these questions are asked, the participants immediately know what is asked for, and within seconds, they are on their way to providing an answer. By contrast, the killer questions are those that have multiple interpretations. Participants hesitate to respond because the question is confusing. Then, while thinking, they become distracted by the comments of other participants and forget their train of thought.

Simple questions do not yield simple answers! It is often the simple question that gets the participant to bring shape and form to the discussion. It pulls out assumptions and lays bare the core principles. You can spot the simple questions because they typically have few words, no jargon or inside language, and no commas, semicolons, or hyphens. The simple question is not condescending or childish. It’s a sophisticated question that gets at the core of the topic.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of simple questions is that they are memorable. Participants may often forget the question if it is too complex. The memorable question is one that continues to “ring” in their heads. Even if someone gets off topic, another participant remembers the question and brings the discussion back on track.

Be Cautious About Giving Examples

Examples are like mental ruts. Although they provide ideas for the type of response, they also limit the thinking of respondents. The danger to the researcher is that these examples give clues to the type of response that might be offered. Suppose you are doing a study of customer satisfaction; because the topic is broad, you decide to use the example of how complaints are handled. Well, handling complaints is only one facet of customer satisfaction, but because it evokes memories and vivid experiences, it can dominate the conversation and prevent other dimensions from emerging. If you do give examples, give them as probes after participants have already given their insights. See if these examples expand the conversation.

In a similar vein, the comments or ideas of some participants can trap and limit the thinking of other participants. Vivid examples, compelling stories, or emotional experiences can easily redirect the conversation and thinking of participants. If this begins to occur, the moderator should repeat the original question, thereby refocusing the discussion on the original intent.

Sequencing the Questions

Overview

Provide Background Information to Participants
General Questions Before Specific Questions
Positive Questions Before Negative Questions
Uncued Questions Before Cued Questions
Participant Categories Before Other Categories

Focus group questions are not just thrown together. With care and thoughtfulness, the researcher arranges a questioning sequence. This question sequence is a hallmark of focus group interviews and the reason that we use the word *focus* in the title. This focused sequence makes sense to participants, and it provides an opportunity for them to anchor their opinions and then build on those views. The first few questions in the focus group discussion allow participants to reflect and think of experiences with the study topic, for example, When and where did they have the experience? How did they feel about it? While participants reflect and talk about their experiences, they are also listening to others tell of their experiences. This listening process is a distinctive feature of focus group interviews. In other research procedures, participants are rarely aware of the views and experiences of others. In focus group interviews, the participants can listen to opinions and experiences of others. Moreover, they can com-



KEY POINT

The Sequence of Questions Is a Hallmark of Focus Group Interviewing

ment, disagree with, or build upon those comments. This focus group strategy is deliberate because it helps participants remember their own experiences and then compare and contrast their experiences with those of others. As a result, the first questions in the focus group become a foundation upon which later discussion is built.

Provide Background Information to Participants

The moderator must provide consistent background information to each participant about the purpose of the study in order to minimize tacit assumptions. In interview situations, respondents make assumptions about the nature of the questions and then answer accordingly. These tacit assumptions are vexing because the respondent may be providing an answer based on faulty assumptions. Paul Lazarfeld provides an illustration of tacit assumption from a detective story by G. K. Chesterton (1951).

Have you ever noticed this—that people never answer what you say? They answer what you mean—or what they think you mean. Suppose one lady says to another in a country house, “Is anybody staying with you?” the lady doesn’t answer “Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the parlourmaid, and so on,” though the parlourmaid may be in the room, or the butler behind her chair. She says “There is nobody staying with us,” meaning nobody of the sort you mean. But suppose a doctor inquiring into an epidemic asks, “Who is staying in the house?” then the lady will remember the butler, the parlourmaid, and the rest. All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly. (p. 98)

All information given in preparation for the discussion helps develop the tacit knowledge of participants. The moderator should be careful so that all advance communication ensures uniformity, consistency, and sufficient generality regarding the purposes of the discussion.

Focus group participants usually want to know the purpose of the session. They may wonder why the session is being held, who the sponsor is, or how the information is going to be used. These topics can be discussed during the invitation phase or at the beginning of the focus group. This information provides clues to respondents about how or in what manner they might respond. It should also provide enough information so that participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Expert moderators are careful to make the introduction smooth and snappy. There is no redundancy, and, as quickly as possible, the moderator engages participants in the discussion.

General Questions Before Specific Questions

The most common procedure in arranging questions is to go from general to specific—that is, beginning with general overview questions that funnel into more specific questions of critical interest. Avoid presenting participants with specific questions without first establishing the context created by more general questions. For example, suppose a series of focus group interviews will be held with young people. The purpose is to learn their perceptions of youth organizations and eventually to identify an effective means of advertising a particular organization. It would be premature to begin with questions on advertising the organization. Instead, the moderator might ask the participants to describe their favorite youth organization or to describe what they like about youth clubs. Later in the discussion, the moderator might narrow the topic to focus on a specific youth organization under investigation. Perhaps toward the end of the discussion, the moderator might solicit opinions on several different approaches that are being considered for advertising the youth group.

An actual illustration of the general-to-specific technique of focusing questions comes from Hawaii. To gain insights into how consumers use Kona coffee, the moderator began with questions about gourmet foods and then asked about gourmet beverages. When a participant suggested Kona coffee, the moderator then encouraged discussion of how and when this type of coffee was used.

The funnel analogy is useful because it presents the researcher with a sequential strategy for arranging questions. The funneling concept is used to move the discussion from broad to narrow, from general to specific, or from abstract to specific. The funneling begins with fairly broad discussion and is followed by a series of narrower, more focused questions. Steadily, the questions become more and more focused, and eventually there are several that exactly hit the target of the inquiry.

Positive Questions Before Negative Questions

A questioning strategy that works well asks participants to comment on both positive and negative experiences or observations. It is interesting that this strategy works better when the first request is for positive items as opposed to negative ones. Perhaps this reflects our mothers' exhortation that we shouldn't say something bad unless we've first said something good.

The benefit of using both positive and negative questions is that this strategy allows participants to comment on both sides of the issue—and in some situations this is particularly important. At times, focus group participants get in a rut and become excessively critical of the topic of investigation. This seems to occur when all participants have common and sometimes unpleasant bonding experiences. It's reasonable for employees of an organization, students in an educational setting, or military personnel to launch into criticism of those who have control and power. Moreover, in some settings, participants attempt to outdo each other with bizarre, extreme, or outlandish experiences. In situations where participants begin with negative features and tend to dwell on the undesirable factors, there is value in "turning the tables" and asking for opposite views: "So what are the benefits of working around here?" "What's positive about being a student?" and so forth.

Often, the transition from positive to negative aspects proceeds smoothly and comfortably, but care is needed so that it isn't premature. One rather predictable scenario is that, while positive attributes are being discussed, a participant might disagree with the positive statement and want to offer a contrary point of view. This can easily lead to discussion of negative attributes without further exploration of other positive ones. Here, the moderator will need to exercise mild control and encourage the group to stick to the positive attributes before shifting to the less desirable features.

Uncued Questions Before Cued Questions

The moderator often faces a dilemma in the questioning route. In some questions, the moderator is seeking new ideas, approaches, or examples from the participants. When examples are provided by the moderator, they can limit or restrict the thinking of participants. A better approach is to begin by asking the question without providing a cue—the uncued question. The uncued question is open-ended, but it is also so all-encompassing that participants may have a little difficulty in providing lengthy commentary. Typically, the responses will be based on participants' most recent or vivid experiences or impressions. The rule of thumb is to ask the uncued question first and then follow up with cues to prompt additional discussion. After the topics have been discussed in a general way, the moderator might then offer some cues and ask for comments. If the moderator does not offer cues and a certain topic is not mentioned, then it is impossible to determine if a point was left out due to an oversight or if it was

just not important. Only by offering cues can the moderator determine the difference. The cues themselves require some thought. They are developed before the focus group and limited in number yet reasonably exhaustive. They should be general enough to allow for a variety of comments and specific enough to prompt ideas and thoughts. Note the example below.



EXAMPLE

Uncued and Cued Questions

In a community needs assessment, the participants were asked to identify what was needed by local residents. The moderator found that initial comments from individuals came from those who had given this topic previous thought or who had relevant recent or vivid experiences. These most recent or vivid experiences are like first impressions in that they tend to be unstable and change as the discussion ensues. After a while, the discussion lagged, and the moderator offered cues. The moderator held up a list of categories as cues to the participants, stating, "Here is a list of topics that might help us think of needs within the community. It includes: family, transportation, health, safety, recreation, youth, seniors. After looking at this list, are there any additional needs that come to mind?" The resulting discussion helped identify a valuable list of community needs.

When using uncued and cued questions, it may also be helpful to include an all-things-considered question, described earlier. In this question, the participants are asked to identify the one factor (need, concern, etc.) that they consider to be the most important (critical, necessary to address, etc.). Responses to this question greatly aid the analysis. An analysis error sometimes made in focus groups is to assume that what is most frequently mentioned is also most important. A far less risky approach is to include a specific question to allow the participants to comment on what they consider to be most important. This all-things-considered question is often invaluable in later analysis.

Participant Categories Before Other Categories

In some studies, the researcher wants focus group participants to rate, rank, or comment on approaches, items, strategies, etc., developed by those outside of the focus group. These could be lists developed by experts or past research. Usually, the preferable sequencing strategy is to begin by asking participants to identify their own categories before considering categories from other sources. It's too easy for participants to find themselves trapped in the approaches and assumptions of others.



EXAMPLE

Importance of Obtaining Participant Responses

Recently, a university conducted a study of water quality in a river basin. The intent was to find out the research needs of farmers and others living in the area. Researchers at the university had already listed preferred research topics, based on their expertise. The questioning strategy was to ask focus group participants to identify areas of research that would be important to them, before they looked at the list prepared by university researchers. Interestingly enough, the lists in this study were quite different. In fact, researchers had based their list on an assumed cause-effect relationship between certain agricultural practices and water quality, whereas farmers discounted the assumption that agricultural practices were the major influence on water quality in the river basin.

Several strategies can be used in developing a list of categories. One is to ask participants to make their own list. Participants can just suggest topics orally, or you could have each person take a moment and list several items on a piece of paper that is then shared with the entire group. A strategy that often works well is to ask participants to list two or three items on a piece of paper, go around the table, and have each person read his or her list, using a flip chart to record responses for all to see. It's important to have participants actually jot down their choices in writing before sharing these orally with others. There is a tendency in some groups for participants not to share their thoughts if they feel intimidated, if they feel their choices are of lesser value, or if their items seem redundant. The written list ensures that all entries are captured. Another variation to developing the list is to meld the participants' nominations with the researcher's list without calling attention to the source of each item. The researcher's list might be developed from a review of research, from expert opinions, or from earlier focus groups. Sometimes, the researcher's list tends to take on the "official and correct aura" if it is introduced separately. To counter this tendency, the moderator announces, "We are in the process of developing categories, and we want to be certain that we've included all of those that are important. Each participant will be asked to make a list, and these will help in developing the larger master list." The assistant moderator collects participants' lists along with the researcher's list, eliminates duplication, and quickly develops a flip chart for discussion.

Several strategies are possible to determine quickly which factors are most important (most helpful, most immediate, etc.). The moderator might ask each person to look over the list on the flip chart and pick one item that he or she considers to be the most important. Again, go around the table so that everyone can suggest his or her "most important" factor. Another process that

works well but takes slightly longer is to ask each participant to rate the importance of every item, using a scale of four or five points. Participants write the name of each item on a piece of paper along with their rating of importance. These can be collected and tabulated silently by the assistant moderator, thereby preserving the confidentiality of each respondent, or orally by just asking all participants to announce their scores.

When participants have made their lists, these can be compared with those of experts. Usually, it is preferable to tell participants that the second list was prepared by "others" or "people who are concerned about this issue," rather than saying that it was prepared by experts. Then participants can look over both listings and pick out what they consider the best of both lists.