

Conducting Interviews or Focus Groups

Writing a topic guide



A topic guide provides the structure and content for an interview or focus group. It's similar to a questionnaire but much less restrictive. Instead you prepare a list of around 5-10 key topic areas that you want to cover. You might also prepare some suggested follow-up questions for each topic.

As interviews or focus groups are relatively flexible you don't need to "stick to the script". Aim to cover all the topics on the guide but you don't need to do so in a set order; try to follow the natural flow of the discussion. The topic guide is there to help you focus the conversation but also to follow up on any points of interest. This might mean creating questions on the spot which can make it difficult to ask unbiased questions which do not lead the interviewees into a particular answer. Try to be conscious of this and practice with a colleague before-hand.

The practicalities of doing an interview or focus group

Numbers: For focus groups have two interviewers – one to lead the questions and the other to look after refreshments or potential interruptions. Each focus group should consist of 4-12 people (not including interviewers). One or two focus groups will probably give you the amount of information you need. For interviews have around 10-15 individuals taking part.

Length: Interviews or focus groups should take around 30 minutes-1 hour 30 minutes to complete. As interviews are one-to-one they will tend to come at the lower end of this bracket. Focus groups are at the higher end, to account for the input of a number of people.



Introductions: Have everyone introduce themselves at the start of the focus group, maybe say a line about themselves too. This will help the group feel comfortable talking with one another and help anyone typing up the conversation later to distinguish who is who. If someone is not comfortable using their real name allow them to use a nick name or a fake name.

Record the conversation: You will not capture everything by writing notes, there could be some really important points that you miss if you do not record the conversation. Use a Dictaphone to record focus groups or face-to-face interviews. To record telephone interviews there could already be a capacity in your workplace to record calls, if not there are devices than you can purchase that attach to the telephone. Be sure to get permission to record the conversation from those taking part. Transcribe the recording after the interview or focus group.