

# Preparing to Collect Data

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## INFORMATION BRIEF: *Developing focus group protocols*

Focus groups are group interviews or discussions ideally involving 8-12 people for a period of about an hour and a half to answer and discuss a set of questions focused on a common experience. Focus groups are useful for gathering information about perceptions, attitudes, and intended actions or application of learning and can be used to gather such data from any group of stakeholders, e.g., teachers, administrators, parents, or students. They are particularly effective in determining underlying issues and concerns that can later be addressed in broader data gathering efforts such as questionnaires.

The focus group protocol seeks answers to questions that are similar to those on a written questionnaire, while providing the opportunity to gather richer and more detailed responses, probe for further information, and clarify any confusing issues. See example focus group protocol.

- Begin by ***making a list of the important topic or topics*** you want to cover, and the pieces of information you need to obtain.
- In developing your questions, ***be mindful that focus groups provide a wonderful opportunity for participants to learn from each other*** and share experiences and ideas. Focus your questions so that you can gain the information needed for your evaluation work and so that participants have a genuine opportunity to learn from each other. For example:
  - "How would you describe the professional development activities in which you participated?"
  - "What was the most important learning or insight that you gained from the professional development?"
  - "How have you applied what you learned in your own classroom teaching?"
  - "What has worked well in your classroom?"
  - "What has been your greatest challenge in implementing the instructional strategies you've mentioned?"
  - "What further professional development support do you need in order to implement the instructional strategies you've mentioned?"
  - "What suggestions would you make to improve the professional development provided by this project?"
- Be sure to ***make your questions open-ended*** and give plenty of opportunity for the focus group participants to share thoughts and opinions. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

- On your protocol, ***note possible probes*** for further detail or clarification. For example:
  - "Can you say more about that?"
  - "Can you be more specific?"
  - "Can you give me an example of that?"
  - "Do others have similar or different experiences to share?"
- ***Be sure that your questions include opportunities for focus group participants to say what is on their minds.*** It's always good to ask a final question such as "Is there anything else you wish to add that I didn't ask you about?"