Tip Sheet: Interviews & Focus Groups
By: Rene Kissell, Laura Pryor, and Laura Tobben

When to Use a Focus Group	
Use when the Goal is to…	**Avoid When…**
✓ Identify or better understand problems that need to be addressed. ✓ Understand complex behaviors and motivations. ✓ Gather an array of opinions, ideas, and perspectives on a topic. ✓ Assess how a program or intervention is working. ✓ Inform the design of a survey or help interpret survey findings. ✓ Test clarity, relevance, credibility, usefulness, or other aspects of messages and materials. ✓ Solicit feedback on plans and policies.	✘ The driving motivation is to save time and money. ✘ The need is for strong predictions about how people will behave. ✘ The breadth of the topic or the size of the target group is too large to allow for focused discussion. ✘ The topic will create serious invasions of privacy or unacceptable levels of stress.

Factors to Consider When Designing and Implementing Focus Groups	
People	**Materials**

• Number of groups and how they will be *segmented:* gender, age, race, income, education, etc. (Advisable to have at least two groups for each segmentation variable.)
 • Who will moderate the groups?
 • Screener (6-8 questions to identify eligible participants)
 • Recruitment of Participants
	• Informed Consent (IRB)
	 • "Day Of" Logistics:
	  o Transportation
	  o Food
	  o Audio/visual needs, etc.
	 • Costs

Focus Group Site	**Follow-Up**

• Location:
  o local, regional, national
  o single city, multiple cities
 • Facilities
	• Potential Participant Compensations
	 • Transcription of groups
	 • What type of analysis will be conducted?
	 • Type of report

Interview Types			
Structure	**Description**	**Nature of Elicited Information**	**Implications for Data Analysis**
Informal Interviews	*Improvised questions *Unstructured *Interviewer has strong content knowledge and interpersonal skills	*Highly individualized *Interview can elicit unanticipated information and insights	*Because different information is gathered from each respondent, analyzing data and making comparisons is difficult
Guided Interviews	*List of general questions *Probes but also improvises questions *Interviewer is adaptable enough to follow relevant lines of unplanned questioning	*Still open-ended enough to ask about unanticipated topics and insights	*Data analysis is more systematic but still allows for the discovery of unanticipated themes
Standardized Interviews	*Same questions in the same order for all interviewees *Open or close-ended question types	*Limits exploration of unanticipated topics or individual concerns	*More efficient interviews and data analysis, useful for limited time/money/experienced interviewers

Source: http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/programs/plan/method/interview-types.php

General Framework of an Interview Protocol
1) <u>Name of Evaluation</u>
2) <u>Date/Time/Location of interview</u>
3) <u>Introduction Script</u>: Thank interviewee for participation, introduce yourself, introduce the study/purpose/affiliations
4) <u>Informed Consent Script</u>: Explain confidentiality/interviewee's rights, explain how the data will be used, provide contact information if interviewee has any questions or concerns, discuss any relevant IRB issues, obtain necessary consent (verbal or written)
5) <u>Relevant Demographic/Background Questions</u>: Interviewee's age/title/etc
6) <u>Questions Relating to Evaluation Question One/Content Area One</u>: Include relevant probing questions
7) <u>Questions relating to Subsequent Evaluation Questions/Content Areas</u>: Include relevant probing questions
8) <u>Conclusion:</u> Thank interviewee for participation, reiterate confidentiality and contact information

*Source: http://www.sairo.ucla.edu/documents/InterviewProtocolTemplateandWorksheet.pdf

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Principles for Writing Good Interview Questions		
Principle	**Bad Example**	**Reformed Example**
Questions encourage description and depth – avoid yes/no questions	"Did you register for the program to increase you knowledge in the field?"	"Please tell me how you got interested in this program"
Language is simple and clear – avoid lengthy, overly complex, questions	"Tell me about the characteristics, experiences, people, and other relevant aspects that resulted in your enjoyment of the program."	"Please describe what you enjoyed most about the program."
Avoid universal word such as 'all,' 'always,' 'none,' or 'never.'	"Is the helpdesk feature always useful for you?"	"How is the helpdesk feature useful and not useful for you?"
Avoid biased questions	"This semester you were introduced to state of the art technology through Explore, Inc. What is your opinion of the program?"	"What is your opinion of Explore, Inc.?"
Once concept per question – avoid double-barreled questions	"How did using Blackboard and the Classroom Performance System help you learn the material in this course?"	"How did using Blackboard help you learn the material in this course?"
Consider the capability of respondents – try to make sure questions will yield accurate/valid responses	"Please tell me about your experience with the English final exam you took three years ago."	"Please tell me about your experience with the last final exam you remember taking."
Source: http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/programs/plan/method/interview-write.php		

Standard Phrases to Encourage or Clarify Responses	
To encourage the participant to continue, use a neutral and 'minimal encourager'	*[Best option: a five-second silence]*: "Uh-huh." / "I see." "O.K."
To learn more about a participant's viewpoint	"Can you tell me more about that?" "Tell me more about that."
To clarify a muddled point	"I'm not sure I understand. Would you explain further?"
To clarify a vague point	"Would you give me an example of that?"
Standard Phrases to Limit Responses	
To limit tangential or overly lengthy answers	"You've offered comments on some other topics. So that we can get through the questions we need to cover for the interview today, let's turn to the next question." *[Then ask the next question]*
To limit responses that are more appropriately handled in another type of setting, e.g., a therapy session rather than a research interview	"You're sharing some feelings that may have arisen. But I need to follow the particular questions in order and length because this is a research interview." *[Then move to the next question]*
Source: Penn State Extension, http://extension.psu.edu/evaluation	

During the Interview	
TO BE **CONSISTENT:** - Always read the instructions to each participant as stated. - Ask every question as stated. - Ask questions in the order as stated. - Memorize and use standard phrases in response to a participant if a participant does not understand a question, or gives tangential or overly lengthy answers.	TO BE **NEUTRAL**: - Avoid agreeing or disagreeing with a participant. - Avoid indicating that a participant's answer is 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' 'poor,' or 'interesting.' - Avoid suggesting an answer or interpreting a question for a participant. - Avoid giving their own opinions during the interview. - Memorize and use standard phrases in response to a participant who is "chatty" or asks for the interviewer's opinion.
Reference: Patton, M.Q. (1987). Depth interviewing. In *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation* (pp. 108-143). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.	