The Art of Facilitating Focus Groups

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Introduction

The purpose of this workshop is to help you effectively plan a focus group, develop a focus group script, facilitate a great discussion, and prepare your notes for content analysis. The contents of this manual correspond to the information presented in the four focus group webinars: Planning a Focus Group; Developing a Focus Group Script; Facilitating a Focus Group; and Note Taking.

Each tip sheet is based on our experiences as evaluation practitioners, as well as advice from authors who are evaluation experts in the field of social science and education (see list of resources). We view facilitation as expressive art that requires creative thinking; therefore, this focus group series has been titled: "the art of facilitating focus groups." Please note that the information represented in the manual is not meant to be exhaustive. Feel free to adopt or modify any recommendations to best fit your needs and the needs of your users.

ACET staff wish to thank participants of earlier focus group training sessions for their lively participation, comments, suggestions, and enthusiasm. Their feedback has greatly improved the material presented here. We would also like to thank Mary Anne Casey, Ph.D., for her valuable comments and suggestions for improving script development and Sandy Donovan, M.A., for editing the manual.

ACET is an independent research group specializing in the evaluation of educational and community-based programs. ACET's mission is to *"provide services to improve organizational effectiveness and build evaluation capacity."* If you have any questions about the material presented in this manual or suggestions, please contact Kirsten Rewey, ACET, Inc., 9868 Lyndale Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55420, (952) 922-1811 or kirsten@acetinc.com.

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Chapter 1: Brief Overview of Focus Groups

In this chapter, we will address the following questions:

- *How are focus groups different from other conversations?*
- *How are focus groups used?*
- *Why use focus groups over other data collection methods?*
- *What are the limitations of focus groups?*

How are focus groups different?

A focus group is, at its simplest, a discussion between a facilitator and a group of people. Focus groups are conducted in a small group setting, which differs from an interview that is conducted one-on-one. What makes focus groups unique and different from general conversations is that the goal of the discussion is to collect data or information about a specific topic, product, or service, making focus groups 'systematic' and 'purposeful.'

By systematic and purposeful we mean that focus groups have guidelines which are followed and provide structure to each session. This is especially important when more than one session is conducted and the evaluator or program staff want to combine what they have learned from multiple sessions into one summary. That summarization is much easier when focus groups follow the same protocol and script.

In a good focus group, the facilitator (person guiding the discussion) follows a protocol or set of instructions for starting and closing the discussion. All participants receive the same important information about topics like taking turns, confidentiality, and respecting each others' perspectives. In addition, because the goal of a focus group is to gather data about a specific topic, event/activity, program, or needs, a good focus group brings together a group of people with similar experiences, interests, goals, or needs.

Furthermore, there is usually a limit on the number of participants in a focus group, which varies depending on the group of participants and the amount of time available. The industry standard is six to eight participants per 1-hour session. If time were limited, we would restrict the number of participants to a maximum of six. Other issues, such as involving translators or interpreters, require adjustments to typical focus group administration. Interpreting conversation so that everyone can participate takes more time than having a monolingual focus group; therefore, ACET also caps the number of participants in bilingual focus group to six participants. Whenever possible, the facilitator should conduct the focus group session in the language participants are most comfortable speaking or using.

Tip #1:
The bigger the focus group, the more time you'll need to ensure everyone's voice is heard. If you have limited time, decrease the number of invitations by two or three.

How are focus groups used?

Focus groups are often used during needs assessments, a process that is used to get a better understanding of community needs and the services available to address them. In addition, focus groups are often used to brainstorm ideas and help make decisions. Focus groups may also be used to learn more about the experiences of customers or program participants and identify ways in which a program can improve. Focus groups are not appropriate as a forum to build consensus, educate people, discuss controversial topics, or obtain sensitive data.

Why use focus groups over other data collection methods?

Focus groups provide participants an opportunity to share their personal experiences and stories. These rich stories can support findings from a survey with limited response options and/or help program staff better understand survey results.

In addition, focus groups allow facilitators to ask follow-up questions. For example, facilitators can ask participants to clarify what they have shared or ask for more details about their experiences. The ability to ask follow-up questions is a distinct advantage over surveys.

Last, focus groups are dynamic. In an interview, the participant and interviewer would have a conversation, and like focus groups, the interviewer could ask follow-up questions. But the content of the interview would be limited to what the participant and interviewer discussed. In contrast, focus groups allow multiple participants to interact: Participants can agree with one another, expand on each other's experiences, and disagree or offer a contrasting opinion. Sometimes what one participant shares in the focus group will spur another participant to share his or her own experiences. This dynamic, fluid environment afforded by a focus group can provide a very rich source of information to support and improve a program.

What are the limitations of focus groups?

Focus groups can be wonderful sources of information for program staff, but they do have some limitations (see also box on the right). First, focus groups are designed to obtain qualitative data with a selected group of participants, whereas surveys can be distributed to reach a wider sample. Second, focus groups require planning: the participants, facilitator, and note taker have to be available at the same time in order to have the focus group. In addition, depending on space available, the facilitator may need to find an appropriately sized space at the right location for participants' convenience. In contrast, surveys, especially paper-and-pencil or online, can be completed at any time.

Focus Groups	Surveys
Feedback obtained from a small group	Can reach a larger sample
Requires planning – everyone has to be available at the same time.	Can be completed any time.
Facilitator needs to build rapport with participants.	No rapport needed.
A few people can dominate a discussion.	Everyone's perceptions contribute equally.
Takes more time than a survey to summarize the results.	Takes less time to summarize than a focus group.

Third, the facilitator needs to build rapport with the participants in a focus group. Establishing a *"connection"* helps to get people engaged in the conversation and willing to share their experiences. On the other hand, no rapport is needed for surveys. Fourth, in a focus group, a few people can dominate a discussion, but with surveys, everyone's perceptions contribute equally to the overall results. Last, focus groups take considerably longer to summarize than surveys.

Despite their limitations, focus groups can be an exceptional source of detailed information and feedback. In Chapter 2, you will learn some tips and techniques for identifying and recruiting participants, scheduling the focus group, and preparing the team and the room for the focus group event.

Chapter 2: Planning a Focus Group

In this chapter, we will describe:

- *How to identify the participant pool and recruit participants;*
- *Scheduling a focus group;*
- *The roles the facilitator and the note taker play in a focus group; and*
- *Strategies used to set the stage for a successful focus group.*

Identifying the participant pool

Once you have determined that conducting focus groups is the optimal data collection method for your project, you are ready to begin planning. One of the first steps will be to determine the number of sub-groups of participants from which you will sample. Keep in mind that the key to a successful focus group is to bring together participants who share a common experience, interest, goal, or need. This could mean that all of the participants belong to the same community group, they have all completed the same course, they all have children at the same school, or some other commonality. If the participants you work with are more similar than dissimilar, then you can probably have only one sub-group of participants participate in the focus groups. If, however, there are separate sub-groups of participants in your population, you may want to consider the utility of conducting separate focus groups with each population sub-group.

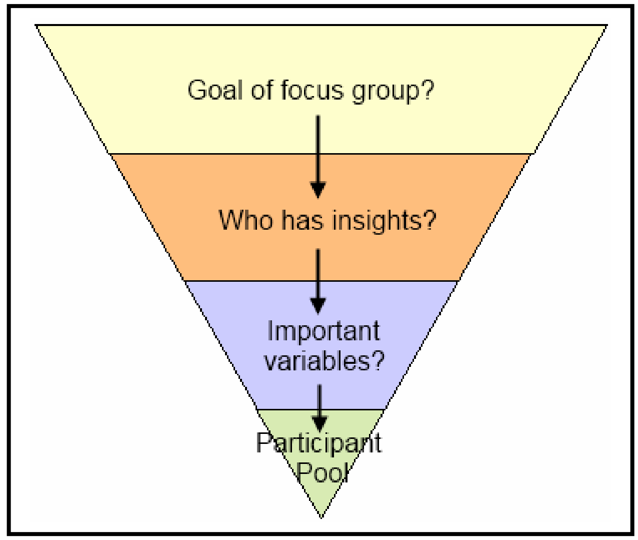
You should also consider the number of focus group sessions you will need. In general, the number of focus group sessions will depend on the purpose or goal of your focus group. As a general rule of thumb, you can gather the best data from two to three focus group sessions. Holding just one focus group is not enough: you would not know if any findings from that discussion are simply a fluke. At a second session, you can begin to identify trends in your findings. By the third session, you can confirm those trends. But by a fourth session, you begin to experience 'saturation'[1]—in other words, you are no longer uncovering new findings or confirming trends, you are simply hearing the same information again. Keep in mind that the total number of focus group sessions you will hold will depend on the goal or purpose for conducting focus groups in the first place. If you are interested in "*learning about your program or obtaining feedback*," you will probably need two to three sessions total, regardless of the number of sub-groups of participants. On the other hand, if your goal is to "*compare and contrast the experiences of groups of participants*," you will need to conduct two to three sessions with each sub-group of participants. Last, if your objective is to "*test a theory*," you will likely need to conduct a minimum of three sessions and continue conducting sessions until saturation is reached.

Tip #2:
The number of focus groups you should conduct will depend upon the goal or purpose of your focus groups:

- Learning about a program or obtaining feedback: 2-3 sessions total;
- Compare and contrast experiences of groups of participants: 2-3 sessions with each sub-group of participants; and
- Test a theory: 3+_sessions to reach saturation.

[1] Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Now that you have identified the number of participant groups and the number of sessions, you can develop a plan for identifying potential focus group participants. In general, you will follow a system illustrated in the figure to the right starting with a large pool of possible clients and narrowing the field down to a smaller group of potential participants. The first step is to identify the goal of your focus group. Next, use the goal of your focus group to identify clients or constituents that are most likely to have insights into your goal. For example, if you are interested in the impact of intensive technical assistance on clients, you might want to narrow your pool of possible focus group participants to those clients who have received intensive technical assistance.



The next step would be to identify important demographic variables and groups among the clients. This will be especially important if you are conducting a focus group to compare and contrast experiences – you will want your sub-groups to reflect the client or participant groups you are most interested in. Ideally, you would want the characteristics of the focus group participants to reflect the characteristics of the larger pool of clients.[2] For example, if 35% of your large pool of clients identify themselves as Deafblind then it would be great if 35% of your focus group participants identified themselves as Deafblind. Aligning the characteristics of the focus group participants with the characteristics of the larger pool of clients allows you to be more confident that the findings you obtain from the focus group are representative of the larger pool of clients.

It is important to be aware that you may need to adjust or revise your plan when you begin recruiting participants. Sometimes, despite your careful planning, the participants you intended to recruit for the focus group are not available: Individuals in all fields are faced with financial and travel constraints, time limitations, and increased work loads that may prevent them from participating in a focus group. As a result you should be prepared to adjust your plan to accommodate those individuals who *are* available. In addition, be aware that having a personal connection with potential participants does not ensure that they will agree to participate in the focus group.

Recruiting participants

Once you know how many sessions you're going to hold, you can begin recruiting participants. Generally, you want to have a sufficient number of participants at the focus group to engage in a lively discussion but also maintain a small enough group so that everyone can participate in the time available. That usually translates into six to ten adults. You may also find it helpful to recruit two or three additional participants to ensure that last minute cancellations or no-shows do not negatively impact the size of the focus group.

☞ Tip #3:
Consider inviting an additional 2-3 participants so that last minute cancellations and/or no-shows do not negatively impact the size of your focus group.

[2] When a group of selected participants matches the larger group, this is known as a 'stratified sample.'

To find participants, you have several options. You can work from an existing list such as a course enrollment list, an association membership list, email or client list, or subscription list. A second option is on-location recruiting, which is often most appropriate when you are researching a particular product or service. For example, to understand how fitness center members feel about the center, you can intercept members at the center and ask them to participate in a focus group. You may also wish to explore online recruitment: you can ask people to participate after they visit your website or after they complete a survey. Last, you can ask focus group participants to refer potential participants. This may be a helpful strategy because it can be used in combination with the other recruitment strategies.

You also have several options for inviting participants. As mentioned above, you can recruit in person in some situations. In other situations, you will be sending an email or a letter, and in others you will be posting an announcement, most likely on a website. Whatever your invitation method, you will want a written invitation to cover certain points:

- The topic and purpose of group (i.e., clearly state what you are hoping to learn from the group and reasons why they should show up);
- The date, time, and location of the event;
- If an incentive is offered, refreshments will be served, etc.; and
- A contact name and number.

When participants agree to participate in the focus group you may find it useful to obtain contact information for them. You will then be able to contact participants if unforeseen events interfere with the focus group. In addition, if there is a 2-3 week, or more, gap between the invitations and the focus group, you may want to forward a reminder to the participants. Although it may feel redundant, the reminder should include the same important information you shared in the original invitation: the purpose and importance of the focus group, day, time, location, map and/or parking information, incentives (if provided), and contact information, should their plans change.

Scheduling the event

Before you conduct your focus group, you will likely have an estimate on how many participants will contribute, what criteria you will apply to select participants, and how you plan to recruit. You can use this information to look for a good location for your focus group. First, you want to find a space that is convenient for your participants. One good strategy is to use a space participants are already familiar with that would be convenient for them. Using a convenient space has two advantages: First, participants are more likely to participate in a focus group if it is easy for them to commute. Second, the familiarity of the space may help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

> Tip #4:
> Whenever possible, use a space that participants are already familiar with. If participants feel comfortable in a familiar space, they may be more willing to share their experiences.

As you look for your space, make sure that the size of the room matches the size of the group. It can be difficult for a small group to feel comfortable in a large room – imagine trying to share your experiences with three other people in a gymnasium. Big rooms just do not work well for a small group. For the same reason, you would not want to try to fit 12 people in a conference room with six chairs – it will be crowded, cramped, and get hot very quickly. If you experience difficulty finding the right sized space, attempt to find a slightly larger room than needed, rather than too small.

Tip #5:
When you find a location, be sure that the size of the room matches the size of the focus group - the participants, facilitator, and note taker.

You will also want to find a convenient time for the focus group. Again, you will have more success finding participants if you can adjust the focus group to their schedule. In particular, finding a time when participants will not have to make a special trip to the focus group location can be very helpful. For example, in a gym, you might want to schedule your focus group shortly after a class or session ends. Similarly, if you are conducting a focus group with teachers, then holding the focus group shortly after school ends may help recruit participants. In summary, the more convenient the time and location, the easier it will be to recruit participants.

Tip #6:
Try to schedule the focus group at a time of day that is convenient for the participants. Time of day is just as important as location!

As a general rule of thumb, 60-90 minutes is a good length for a focus group. During that time you will likely cover about six to eight questions per hour and allow for additional time for introductions, for participants to settle themselves in the room, and to prepare technology. If you are serving refreshments, be sure to budget some additional time. A focus group should never exceed two hours.

There are a number of ways in which technology can support facilitation of the focus group, recording the event, and supporting note taking so the focus group team should work together to determine which technologies, if any, will be used. For example, some focus group teams feel that it is useful to project the focus group script items (one at a time) during the focus group and some focus group teams prefer to audio record the event for later analysis. In order to determine your technology needs for the focus group, consider the following:

- Will you be projecting anything (e.g., script items, images, brief video) during the focus group?
- Will you be utilizing any speech-to-text services?
- Will you be making and audio- or video recording the conversation? If so, how? Will the space accommodate the recording?
- Will the note taker be using technology to take notes?
- If you are using any type of technology, how many extension cords and/or surge protectors will you need?

The facilitator and note taker

There are two major roles in a focus group: the facilitator and the note taker. The facilitator is responsible for interacting with the participants and conducting the focus group and working with the note taker to construct accurate notes. Specifically, the facilitator needs to:

- Be a good listener, observer, and communicator;
- Feel comfortable using a number of techniques to manage participants who may dominate the conversation;
- Demonstrate respect and sensitivity for the experiences of others;
- Be aware of everyone's contributions to the focus group;
- Maintain neutrality (not agreeing or endorsing anyone's opinions or experiences);
- Defuse arguments if they surface; and

- Carry out the ground rules.

The note taker is responsible for recording the focus group discussion and the note taker needs to:

- Assist as a silent observer– can ask for clarification;
- Record key ideas, quotes, and nonverbal activity;
- Keep extra supplies on hand; and
- Wear multiple hats if needed.

Once roles have been assigned, the focus group team should spend some time preparing themselves and developing a plan for the focus group event. First, print copies of the script for the facilitator, note taker, and any supportive staff (e.g., interpreter, speech-to-text provider) assisting with the focus group. During the focus group the facilitator will use the script to lead the discussion and the note taker will align the script with any notes that are taken.

Tip #7:
If you are concerned about reading the focus group script, try enlarging the font size to 14 points, bold the script, and set the line spacing to 1.5. You will need more paper, but you may find it easier to read during the focus group.

It is essential that facilitators be very familiar with the focus group protocol and script. Facilitators should practice reading or signing the script aloud several times so that they are comfortable using the script when the participants are present. The goal of practicing the script is for facilitator's presentations to be smooth and effortless. Practicing the script out loud can also help identify any parts of the script that may need a final, polishing edit. Often, script items are grammatically correct on paper may feel awkward or cumbersome when they are spoken or signed. Practicing the script can provide the opportunity to identify any cumbersome spots and address them prior to the focus group.

Tip #8:
Reading the protocol and script silently to yourself is not enough - practice reading the protocol and script out loud several times. By reading the materials out loud you will become more comfortable with the script and will be able to easily read it to the focus group participants.

The note taker should also take the opportunity to prepare a system for taking notes, whether those notes be paper-and-pencil or electronic. Although taking notes sounds easy, it can be tricky to do so in a dynamic, fluid environment like a focus group. The note taker should have some system in mind to keep track of (a) changes in the question, and (b) changes in the speaker. Some strategies for the note taker are presented in a later section of the manual. Before the focus group begins, the note taker should identify the strategy they will use and make preparations as needed.

The facilitator and note taker should also discuss the focus group script, including a review of how much time they would like to spend on each question. In particular, you should plan to spend more time on the big or important questions and less time on questions that are focused on one issue or topic. Planning time allotments for questions in the focus group script can help you ensure that you get through the entire script and that you are not rushed at the end. This can be a challenge for many novice facilitators.

Last, if any technology is being used, the facilitator and note taker should test the technology to ensure that it works. In particular, you want to ensure that different technologies will work together. For example, with the projector work with the laptop you intend to use? If not, do you need to install a driver or will you need to identify a different projector or laptop? Will the microphones work with the recording software you will be using? And how loud does someone's speech need to be to be detected by the microphone? Working out potential technological issues now ensures that the technology will work smoothly on the day of the focus group. In addition, if you are planning to use an audio recorder, take the opportunity now to make sure you are fully prepared:

- Tape recorder: make sure the tape is rewound and that you are ready to record;
- Digital recorder: make sure that all other digital recordings have been removed and that you will have enough space on the recorder for the full and entire focus group session; and
- Battery operated recorder: make sure you have spare batteries to ensure enough power throughout the focus group session.

Preparing the room

You can set the stage for a successful focus group by following some simple tips to prepare the room and the focus group team (facilitator and note taker). First, arrive at least 30 minutes early. You may need to hang signs to direct participants to the room where the focus group is being held, obtain a key from building staff, or move furniture to prepare the space. You should also spend some time arranging the chairs and/or tables so that participants can feel comfortable in the space. In general, arranging chairs and/or tables in a circle or square can promote communication between the facilitator and the participants. Using a circle or square can also help promote dialogue between the participants – a lecture-style seating arrangement (all seats in rows facing the same direction) should be avoided. Again, the goal is to create a safe and welcoming environment that will encourage people to share their experiences.

Tip #9:
Arrive at the focus group location about 30 minutes before the scheduled start time to prepare the space.

Next, decide where the facilitator and the note taker will sit. It can be helpful if the facilitator and the note taker are sitting opposite each other. By doing so, focus group team members can maintain eye contact at important points and provide nonverbal cues. Facilitators may also want to sit where they can see a wall clock so they can keep track of time without making the obvious motion of checking their watch or other timers. And the facilitator and note taker should sit far enough apart that they can maintain eye contact throughout the focus group.

Once the seating is arranged, set up any technology you will be using. If you will be showing slides, images, or a presentation to the participants, make sure that the projection system is close to a wall outlet and that all participants will be able to see the projected images without contorting their bodies. Also, if the note taker will be relying on any electronic recording devices (including a laptop to type notes), you may need a wall outlet and/or surge protector to ensure you have power to last through the entire focus group. It is a good idea to bring an extension cord just in case.

Tip #10:
If you are using technology during the focus group, make sure that all participants will see projected images (if needed), you will have sufficient power to last the entire focus group, and all technological devices are ready for the start of the focus group.

And, if you are providing refreshments, set them up last. Doing so will ensure you have the maximum time to arrange the room and technology then test the technology prior to participants' arrival. In addition, if you are setting up the refreshments as participants arrive it is a great opportunity to invite them to help themselves to the selection and welcome them to the focus group.

Tip #11:
Try to select healthy refreshments like pretzels, fruit, vegetables, or cheese and crackers, and choose drinks that are low in sugar like water, juice, coffee, or tea. Refreshments that participants can eat with their hands and do not require a plate, bowl, or utensils will help keep costs, and waste, down.

Tip #12:
Participants will need time to get their refreshments, eat a bit, and settle down before the focus group can begin. If you decide to offer refreshments, plan on starting the introduction to your focus group about 10-15 minutes after the scheduled start of the focus group.

Preparing for remote focus groups

While conducting focus groups in person is usually preferred, it is sometimes necessary or more convenient to conduct them remotely. Remote focus groups can be conducted by either telephone or video conferencing systems. Generally, these remote methods are used when geographic location, busy schedules, or financial constraints prevent participants for gathering in the same physical space.

Tip #13:
Remote focus groups are useful when potential participants are spread across a broad geographic area, have busy schedules, or financial or policy constraints which may limit in-person focus groups.

Telephone calls have several benefits over in-person focus groups: costs can be lower, scheduling is often easier, and the focus groups can have a broader geographic reach. There are, however, several challenges that need to be considered before deciding to use a telephone conference call for a focus group. First, the sense of 'group' can be diminished because participants cannot see each other. The lack of visual cues also makes turn taking more difficult: it is harder for the facilitator to recognize who wishes to participate and makes it more difficult for participants to follow-up on each other's comments. Also, because everyone is relying on audio content only, it can be difficult for a facilitator to establish rapport with participants in a telephone-based focus group. Last, the event can feel very formal to participants who are not sitting together to engage in a conversation; this can lead to diminished feedback if a facilitator is not careful. It is important to note that none of the above challenges are insurmountable, but you should be aware of them so they can be addressed.

Video conferencing shares many of the same benefits as phone conferencing, but video conferencing also offers the advantage of focus group participants being able to see each other. The visual input can help the facilitator establish rapport and can make turn-taking easier. With video conferencing, however, facilitators face an extra challenge of ensuring that the complex technology is working smoothly. For instance, there is a great deal of variability across Skype, Nefsis, and GoToMeeting with regards to software and hardware requirements. And although focus group participants can download the necessary software quite easily, if the user is uncomfortable with technology or lacks IT support, they may ultimately not feel comfortable participating in a technology-based focus group. In addition, some nonprofit agencies have outdated equipment which may not have webcam capabilities or the hardware to support high-speed internet needed for video conferencing. Again, the software and hardware challenges are not insurmountable problems, but you should be aware of them should you decide to use video conferencing.

Furthermore, even when the technology works as expected, it is quite common to experience delayed replay or frozen frames when using video conferencing systems. These effects can diminish the conversational feeling of the meeting. Finally, many video conferencing systems have a functional limit on the number of participants that can be accommodated before video and/or audio quality downgrades. That functional limit will vary across vendors, but internet bandwidth limitations often make focus groups with more than six individuals (facilitator, note taker, and four participants) impractical.

☞ Tip #14:
Limit technology use to one method per group. Mixing technology can result in inconsistent data. For instance, if you have six participants gathered in a room, do not use phone or web conferencing to have another participant join.

Chapter 3: Characteristics of a Good Focus Group Script

In this chapter, we will address the following:

- *What is the purpose of a focus group script?*
- *What are the parts of a focus group script?*

Why use a focus group script?

A focus group script serves as a guide for the facilitator to successfully implement a focus group discussion. The script provides structure to the conversation, defines, the purpose of the event, and helps keep the discussion on-track. In addition, a focus group script is critical when multiple focus group sessions are held. The script ensures that all participants in all focus groups receive the same instructions and the same questions. The consistency across groups is invaluable when the facilitator and note taker begin to draw connections across focus groups.

What are the parts of a focus group script?

A focus group script typically consists of five parts:

- An introduction;
- Ice-breaker;
- Core questions;
- Additional comments; and
- Closing/Wrap-up.

The Introduction/Welcome. The introduction/welcome is the first opportunity the facilitator has to start building rapport and establishing a safe, welcoming environment for participants to share their experiences. The components of the introduction/welcome are summarized in the left side of Table 1 below. Table 1 includes all the needed components of the introduction in two formats – bullets (on the left) and narrative (on the right). The format of the introduction is typically up by the facilitator. The facilitator should choose a format they are most comfortable using. Those who are new to focus groups may be more comfortable with a narrative as this approach limits the amount of *ad libbing* needed. Facilitators who use the bulleted approach should discuss the bullets in order during the focus group; doing so minimizes the likelihood that one of the introduction components is inadvertently skipped.

☞ Tip #15:
If you choose to use the bulleted format for the introduction to the focus group, make sure to cover the bullets in order. Doing so will minimize the likelihood that one or more components is inadvertently omitted.

During the introduction, the facilitator should first thank participants for their valuable time and their willingness to share their experiences and/or expertise. The facilitator should also share the purpose of and context for the focus group; doing so will assure participants that they have experiences and/or expertise that are applicable to the focus group. At some point during the introduction the facilitator should introduce the team – themselves and the note taker and/or interpreter, if one is present.

Table 1. Components of the Focus Group Script Introduction/Welcome with Narrative Example

Introduction/Welcome Components	Introduction/Welcome Example
▪ Thank participants ▪ Purpose and context of the focus group ▪ Introduce focus group team ▪ Confidentiality/anonymity ▪ Incentives, other information ▪ Ground rules ▪ Opportunity to ask questions	*"Thank you, everyone, for participating in today's focus group; we really appreciate that you are willing to share your valuable time with us. As we mentioned in the invitation email you received, the purpose of today's focus group is to learn more about your experiences with video relay systems. My name is Kirsten and I will be guiding the discussion today and over there is my note taker Joseph. Please let either of us know if we can do anything to make today's focus group more enjoyable for you. As you can see, we do have a recorder and we are recording the discussion today but before we get started, I'd like to share with you the strategies we will be using to protect your confidentiality and your anonymity. First, no one at Agency X will have access to today's recording or the transcript from the recording. Second, when we summarize the results from today's focus group we will strip out as much identifying information as possible to ensure that your comments are protected. We will also use some quotes, but we never identify who provided the quote. So I'd like to encourage you to share as much as you feel comfortable. We do have some gift cards as a thank you for participating in today's focus group and I will distribute those when we are finished. Last, you can see we have a relatively full house today. Because of that, please don't be offended if I have to limit some of your comments. I want to make sure that everyone in today's focus group gets a chance to share their experiences. Also, it would be really helpful if we could have only one person talking or signing at a time so that we can all follow the conversation. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?"*

The facilitator should also summarize any strategies they will be using to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. At a minimum the facilitator should indicate whether or not participant's identity (name, affiliation, employer, or any identifiable demographic information) will be attached to any quotes or acknowledged in any reports. And if any type of audio or video recording will be made of the focus group, the facilitator should address the security of the recording(s) and who will have access to the recordings and any transcripts made from the recordings. Information about confidentiality and anonymity should be shared so that participants can determine how much information they are willing to share *before* the beginning of the focus group.

If any incentives have been promised to participants the facilitator should share how and when those incentives will be distributed. And the facilitator should also describe any ground rules they would like implemented during the focus group (additional information about ground rules is provided below). Last, the facilitator should give the participants the opportunity to ask questions prior to the start of the focus group. Depending on the question, the facilitator can choose to answer the question immediately or defer the question until later in the focus group session. For example, if a participant asked a question about the location of the rest rooms, a facilitator should answer that question immediately. But if the question was about the content of the focus group (e.g., "will we get to discuss X?") the facilitator can assure the participant that they will have an opportunity to share their experiences later in the session.

"Ground rules" are used to ensure that the focus group is smooth and that all participants have an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences. In general, once the ground rules have been introduced, participants have been very respectful and responsive. Two frequently used ground rules are for limiting comments and for turn taking. Limiting comments is generally used to ensure that a small number of people do not dominate the conversation. When introducing this ground rule it is important to emphasize that your goal is to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share his or her thoughts. For example, the facilitator might state, *"Please don't be offended if I limit some of your comments; I want to make sure that everyone gets a chance to share their story."* The second ground rule is to encourage turn taking. This ground rule can take a number of different forms, from simply encouraging participants to take turns, to asking participants to raise their hand, and even using a 'talking stick' with younger focus group participants. For example, facilitators wishing to establish a ground rule for one person talking or signing at a time might include the following in their introduction, *"It would be wonderful if we could have only one person talking or signing at a time so that we can all follow the conversation."* Alternatively, if the facilitator wishes for participants to take turns, they might use the following for their ground rule, *"If you have something to share, please [raise your hand] so that we can all pay attention to your contribution."*

Establishing ground rules in technology-based focus groups is important, too. As was described in an earlier chapter, with focus groups conducted via conference call the lack of visual cues makes turn taking a challenge. When facilitating a focus group over the telephone, facilitators may wish to ask participants to verbally indicate when they have completed their thought so that another individual can share. Even something as simple as *"I'm done"* or *"thank you"* can successfully signal that the participant has finished his or her thoughts and that another participant can begin. Although video conference call focus groups do have visual cues it is often the case that lag time in transmitting video and/or audio signals can result in multiple participants sharing at the same time. For that reason, those facilitating video conference focus group may wish to use a turn taking ground rule such as acknowledgement of one participant's input before soliciting input from another to ensure that only one participant is sharing their thoughts at a time. This process of acknowledging each participants comment before allowing another participant to provide input share very similar characteristics of a classroom setting where the teacher calls upon the pupil to provide input while other pupils wait for their turns to provide input.

Tip #16:
During telephone focus groups, ask participants to use their name prior to sharing any comments. Doing so helps participants, facilitator, and note taker keep track of the discussion.

The Ice Breaker. The ice breaker is very useful in focus groups for several reasons. First, the ice breaker helps transition from the facilitator doing most of the talking to the participants doing most of the talking or signing. In addition, the ice breaker warms up the participants and prepares them to share with each other, something facilitators want to encourage throughout the focus group. Last, the ice breaker helps the facilitator build rapport with participants. In general, the ice breaker is a straightforward question which participants can answer easily. And while the ice breaker questions do help break the ice and get participants sharing with one another, they are also providing valuable information on your focus group topic. Sample ice breaker questions include:

- *"Let's go around the room for introductions."*
- *"Please describe how you first heard about video relay systems."*
- *"Tell me, how long you've been involved in the deaf/hard of hearing community?"*
- *"Please give me a few words that come to mind when you think about videophones; these words can be positive, negative, or neutral."*

Additional strategies to further build rapport with participants are discussed in the next chapter. We recommend listing 1-2 ice-breaker questions and reserving the majority of the focus group time to ask your core questions.

Core Questions. The bulk of the focus group conversation comes from the core questions. In general, core questions are going to start general and be more specific as time progresses. In a 60-minute focus group about 6-8 core questions, with follow-up or probe questions, can be comfortably covered. Effective core questions should be short, concise, conversational, and open-ended. *Short core questions* are particularly effective because they are easy for both the facilitator and the participants to remember. During a focus group the questions posed by the facilitator are processed by short-term memory and, as the name implies, short-term memory lasts for a short time. Depending on the sense and if there is any incoming, competing information, short-term memory can last as long as 20 seconds or as short as 4 seconds. Studies on short-term memory have found that, when faced with lengthy information, people tend to remember the first part of the information or the last part; information in the middle tends to get forgotten very quickly. In other words, with lengthy focus group questions, participants are likely to remember and respond to the beginning of the question or the end of the question while the middle of the question gets lost. To maximize the likelihood that participants will remember and answer a focus group question keep it short.

Table 2 below shows a focus group question that is overly complex and a suggestion for improvement. In general, there are two strategies for improving complex questions – dividing the question into several questions or simplifying the question. As can be seen in the Table, the first strategy is used. The example question has multiple parts and is shortened when each part is posed as a separate question. During the focus group each question would be posed individually and participants would have the opportunity to respond to the question before moving on.

Table 2: Example Complex Question and Suggested Improvement

Complex Question	Suggested Improvement
"Please describe your first experience as an interpreter and tell me what you feel you've learned since then and how your organization could have better supported you."	*"Tell me about your first experience as an interpreter."* *"What do you feel you've learned since then?"* *"How could your organization have better supported you?"*

Second, effective focus group questions are concise and concrete and avoid technical or jargon-rich language. Table 3 below shows an example jargon-rich question and a suggested improvement. Core questions that are overly technical or jargon-rich require more time to process and understand and, because of that, short-term memory is loaded which can interfere with participants' responses. In addition, unless all participants were screened for their familiarity with jargon, there is the possibility that one or more participants in a focus group will not recognize a technical term or jargon and may not respond to a focus group item. To improve overly technical or jargon-rich questions the easiest strategy is to remove the technical language or jargon to simplify the question.

Table 3: Example Jargon-Rich Question and Suggested Improvement

Jargon-Rich Question	Suggested Improvement
"How has your training improved your understanding of OSEP's requirements for reporting on Part B Indicator 3?"	*"How has training improved your understanding of your state's assessment system?"*

Next, effective focus group questions are *conversational and open-ended* and invite participants to share their thoughts. Some example closed-ended questions and suggested improvements are shown in Table 4 below. The problem with closed-ended questions is that people tend to answer just the questions they were asked without any additional explanation. In general, if either of the closed-ended questions from Table 4 were posed to a focus group, participants would likely provide a simple response (e.g., "action" or "yes") but would not expand on their response. However, if an open-ended question were posed, focus group participants could provide their initial answer (e.g., "action") and then share other thoughts. In addition, when open-ended questions are asked in a conversational manner participants feel relaxed and comfortable which can facilitate participants' sharing.

Table 4: Example Closed-Ended Questions and Suggested Improvements

Closed-Ended Questions	Suggested Improvements
"What qualitative software do you like best – Nvivo or Atlas.ti?"	*"What method do you use most often when analyzing qualitative data?"*
"Have you worked with deaf consumers?"	*"Tell me about the work you've done with deaf consumers."*

Closed-ended questions do have a place in focus group scripts because they can be useful filters to determine the appropriateness of later questions, but closed-ended questions should used minimally so that conversation and sharing is encouraged. Closed-ended question could be used to set up a strand of questions or to determine which follow-up probes to use. For instance, a facilitator may start by asking a closed-ended question (e.g., *"Which webinar benefited you the most, 1 or 2?"*) and follow-up with a series of probe questions (e.g., *"Can you tell me how did the webinar benefitted your work?" "How could the other webinar be improved to better benefit your work?"*)

Last, effective focus group questions encourage explanation and clarification without directly asking "why." People tend to interpret "why" questions as confrontational and the more comfortable participants are, the more likely they will feel comfortable sharing their experiences. There are a number of alternative question formats that can get at "why" clients responded the way they did without using "why." Table 5 below shows two example "why" questions and suggested improvements. In both cases, the more confrontational "why" has been replaced with alternatives that are less confrontational while still being conversational, open-ended, and inviting participants' responses. For example, "why did you say that?" can be posed to participants as "Can you tell me more about what happened?"

Table 5: Example Confrontational Questions and Suggested Improvements

Confrontational Questions	Suggested Improvements
"Why did you say that?"	*"Can you tell me more about what happened?"* *"Can you tell me more about why you feel [repeat earlier comment]?"*
"Why is Program X effective?"	*"Which parts of Program X did you find beneficial?"* *"Which parts of Program X did you find to be effective?"*

Tip #17:
Effective core questions are:

- short, and *not* multi-pronged or overly complex;
- concise and concrete, and do *not* use technical terms or jargon;
- conversational and open-ended, with a minimum of closed-ended or yes/no questions; and
- avoid directly asking "why."

Anything else? Time permitting, it is often useful to ask participants if they have anything else to share about their experiences. Asking participants the "anything else?" question can be very useful for two purposes. First, participants may share some very useful information. And being able to capture additional information regarding the purpose of the focus group can be serendipitous and enlightening. Second, asking the "anything else" question gives participants an opportunity to share what *they* want to share instead of being constrained by the script. And if participants can share what's on their mind, they are more likely to have a positive focus group experience. The positive experience may, in turn, lead to more focus group participation in the future.

The Closing/Wrap-Up. The closing or wrap-up is the transition out of the focus group. As can be seen in Table 6, the closing/wrap-up is generally a briefer version of the introduction/welcome and includes an opportunity for participants to ask questions, thanking participants for their comments and participation, assuring participants that their feedback will be shared, a brief review of strategies to protect confidentiality and anonymity, and distribution of incentives. In Table 6 those components are shown in two formats, bullets (on the left) and narrative (on the right). The format of the closing/wrap-up is up to the facilitator and they should select a format with which they are the most comfortable. Again, if facilitators decide to use the bullet format, they should review the bullets in order to minimize the likelihood that any components of the closing/wrap-up are inadvertently omitted at the end of the focus group.

Table 6. Components of the Focus Group Script Closing/Wrap-Up with Narrative Example

Closing/Wrap-Up Components	Closing/Wrap-Up Example
▪ Give participants opportunity to ask questions ▪ Thank everyone for their participation ▪ Assure participants their comments will be shared ▪ Remind participants their anonymity will be protected ▪ Distribute incentives, if appropriate	*"Those are all the questions I have for you today. Does anyone have any questions for me? …* *I'd like to thank all of you for participating in today's focus group. Your comments and insights were very valuable and I want to assure you that your comments will be used to [insert purpose here]. Again, I want to assure you that your comments will remain anonymous and I will protect your anonymity by securely maintaining the recording and transcript of today's conversation. I will also be editing out any identifying information, like names, to protect participants' identity, and when I use a quote I will remove your name. Last, I do have some gift cards for you as a thank you for participating in today's focus group. As you pick yours up, please sign the roster to indicate you have received your card. And thanks again!"*

Chapter 4: Developing a Good Focus Group Script

In this chapter, we will address:

- *What is the intent of the focus group?*
- *How does one develop a focus group script?*
- *How does one 'field test' a focus group script and how are the results of the field testing used?*

The Intent of a Focus Group Script

A well-developed focus group script has an intent or purpose, whether that intent is obtaining feedback on a new event, brainstorming a solution to a new or unique problem, or obtaining information about the effectiveness of a program. Regardless, it is important that the core questions of the focus group reflect the purpose and intent of the focus group. In other words, the focus group is being facilitated for a reason and it is important to be mindful of that reason throughout script development so that, after the focus group is finished, participants' comments can be linked back to the focus group's purpose.

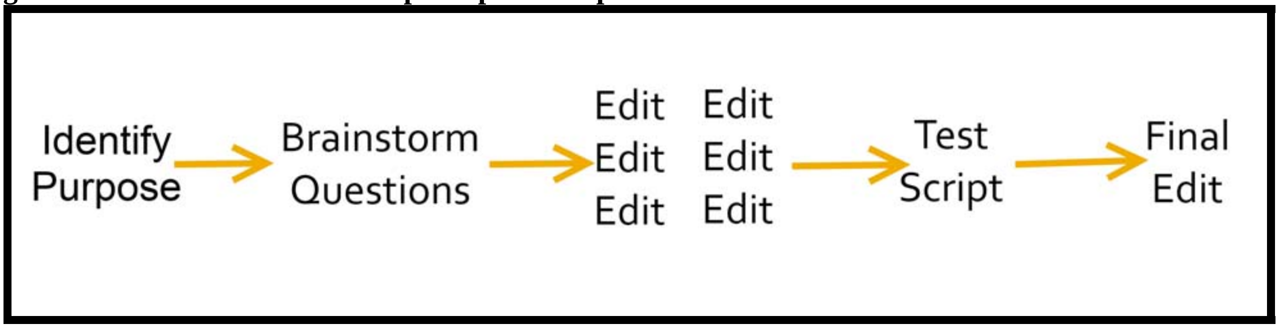
If the focus group is planned for program evaluation, the script is often linked to the logic model and/or evaluation plan. A **logic model** summarizes the theory of change underlying an intervention, product, or policy. Logic models can take numerous formats but typically include inputs (resources available to a project), activities (actions or strategies undertake to achieve a desired end product), outputs (the immediate results of activities), and outcomes (desired accomplishments or changes). An **evaluation plan** is an extension of a logic model and serves as the blueprint to data collection. The evaluation plan includes key questions to be addressed, the desired outcomes of the program (directly from the logic model), specific indicators (how progress and/or success will be defined), methodology (data collection tools to be used), and a timeline for data collection (timeline, individual[s] responsible). If a logic model or evaluation plan are unavailable, other program documents-such as a strategic plan or annual report-can be used to identify the purpose of the focus group.

Tip #18:
Identify the purpose of the focus group prior to writing the script. Doing so will increase the likelihood that the results of the focus group can be linked back to the purpose of the focus group.

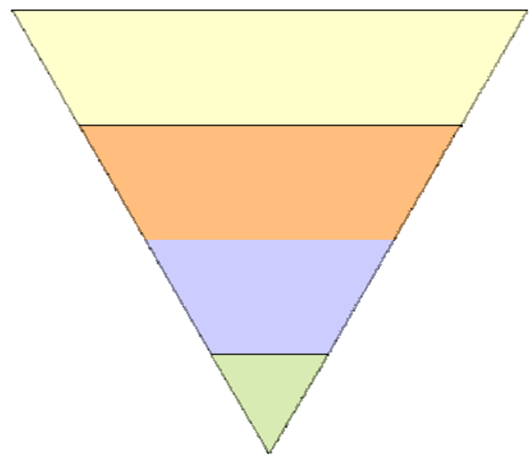
Focus Group Script Development

Figure 1 below shows an overview of focus group script development. Once the purpose of the focus group has been identified, the next step is to brainstorm questions. During the brainstorming, the goal is quantity – a large number of questions generated. Do not attempt to edit the questions at this point, simply try to come up with varied and different ways of asking questions. If possible, try to have 3-4 (or more) questions for each are of the logic model or evaluation plan. If possible, involve others in the brainstorming process so that, at the end, there is a "question pool" with a wide range of questions.

Figure 1. Overview of Focus Group Script Development



Once brainstorming is finished editing can begin. During editing one goal is to fine-tune the questions so that they conform to the guidelines for effective focus group questions described in Chapter 3. In other words, the questions should be reviewed to ensure that they are: (a) short and not multi-pronged or overly complex; (b) concise and concrete, without technical terms or jargon; (c) conversational and open-ended, with a minimum of closed-ended or yes/no questions; and (d) avoid directly asking "why?" And questions that may not be effective at tapping into the purpose or intent of the focus group should be eliminated. A second goal of the editing phase is to organize the questions from broad to more specific, like the upside-down triangle discussed in Chapter 2 (see figure to the right). By the end of the editing phase the script should contain between 6 and 8 core questions for the focus group. Once the initial editing has taken place, it may be useful to show the script to colleagues or stakeholders to get their input. They may have suggestions to improve the script, such as converting a yes/no question into one that is more conversational or suggesting a revised order to the questions.



An example of brainstormed questions and the edited results are shown in Table 7 below. This example is based on a technology program for teachers. The program introduces teachers to various technology tools that can be used in the classrooms to enhance student learning. A hypothetical evaluation plan for the technology program might include the indicator: "75% of classroom teachers report the materials (included in the toolkit) are useful." On the left side of the table are a number of brainstormed items to assess progress towards the 75% indicator. Notice that most of the questions in the brainstormed column are closed-ended! In addition, one question – "Did classroom students have any difficulty understanding the materials" – is not related to the indicator.

Table 7. Example Brainstormed and Edited Questions

Technology Program Evaluation Plan includes:
"**75% of classroom teachers report the materials (included in the toolkit) are useful.**"

Brainstormed Questions	Edited Questions

• Did classroom students share with you any thoughts or feelings they had about the materials?
• Did you read the materials"
• How useful were the materials?
  ○ Were the materials useful during planning on class assignments? In the classroom? Afterwards?
• Did classroom students have any difficulties understanding the materials?
• What did you think of the materials?
• Did classroom students ask you any questions about the materials? If so, what kinds of questions?
	• What did you think of the materials?
	• How did you use the materials?
	  ○ When planning for class assignments? The day of the class assignment? Afterwards?
	  ○ How useful were the materials to you? To your students?
	• Do you have any suggestions to improve the materials?

During the editing phase several changes were made. First, the irrelevant question on reading difficulty was eliminated. Second, while two questions on usefulness were retained, one was edited into a form that would promote conversation among focus group participants. Next, questions were re-ordered so that the broadest question occurred first followed by more specific questions. And last, one new question (suggestions to improve materials) was added.

As in the brainstorming phase, having other interested parties like collaborators and stakeholders review brainstormed questions and edit them can be very helpful. Collaborators and stakeholders can provide a "new set of eyes" to the script and make suggestions for improving either the questions or their order.

After editing is complete, the script should contain: (a) the introduction/welcome; (b) an ice breaker; (c) the 6-8 core questions; (d) the "anything else" question (if appropriate); and (e) the closing/wrap-up. The script is now ready for field testing. During field testing individuals who are similar to the focus group participants read through the script and provide feedback. The feedback on the script can yield powerful information on how participants would react to the core questions when they are presented in the focus group. If the field testers identify problematic questions, the author(s) of the focus group script can use the feedback to improve the questions. The field testing ultimately saves time and money – script items are refined *before* potentially problematic items are shared with participants; in addition, no incentives are distributed until script items are ready for the focus group.

Field testing can be informal or formal. Informal field testing is relatively inexpensive, quick, and yields useful information, but may not provide the depth needed to refine intricate focus group scripts. With informal field testing, 3-4 individuals who are similar to the focus group participants are identified. The field testers then read the script and are asked to respond to four questions:

- Did you have to reread any questions? If yes, which ones?
- Were any questions hard to answer? If yes, which ones?
- Did any of the questions (or terms used) make you uncomfortable? If yes, which ones?
- Did any of the questions drag or take too long? If yes, which ones?

The responses to the above questions are then used to refine the core questions prior to use in a data collection setting.

A more formal process of field testing can be useful to better understand what responses will be offered by participants so that adjustments could be made to the script for probes. In other words, with formal field testing, the focus group is conducted with field testing participants so that the facilitator and note taker have a deeper understanding of how participants will respond. The focus group author(s) can then adjust the script to ensure they are receiving the most useful data from the focus group participants. With formal field testing, 6-8 individuals who are similar to the focus group participants are identified; if multiple groups of stakeholders are involved, field testing should occur with each group. A focus group facilitator and note taker lead the individuals through the focus group: the facilitator guides the discussion while the note taker records the event and notes the non-verbal behaviors of the individuals. After the formal field test, the facilitator and note taker debrief and answer the following questions for *each* item of the script:

- Did respondents answer the question as intended? How many?
- Did respondents offer an explanation to the question? If yes, how many? If no, why not? Did the facilitator have to probe? Was the probe on the script? If no, what question was asked by the facilitator to solicit further responses?
- Did respondents ask for clarification to any questions?
- Any pauses? If yes, how long and which question required additional thinking?
- Did respondents skip any questions? If yes, which one and what was answered instead?
- With the closing question, what answers were offered?
- What questions were asked by participants?

Note that, because the field testing does involve planning, facilitating, and debriefing of a focus group, there is a considerable investment of time in the field testing process. This investment of time may be warranted depending on the purpose of the focus group or, the number of focus groups which are scheduled to be facilitated.

Tip #19:
For both informal and formal field testing, individuals who are similar to the focus group participants ***but who will not participate in the focus group*** are asked to provide feedback. If an individual participates in the field testing process they are ineligible to participate in the focus group used for data collection because they have been pre-exposed to the focus group items. For this reason, individuals for the field testing should be selected ***carefully***.

Chapter 5: Facilitating a Focus Group

In this chapter, we will address the following questions:
- *What are some effective facilitation strategies?*

Effective facilitators have learned how to be casual enough to balance rapport and professionalism. As a facilitator, it is important to connect with participants and establish a safe, open, and respectful environment where all participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences. However, if the facilitator is too casual, participants may not perceive them as someone who is prepared to take their feedback seriously. Facilitators can use one or more of the following strategies to find their balance between rapport and professionalism:
- Building rapport;
- Being direct;
- Using reflection;
- Probing with questions;
- Being comfortable with silence (or conversational lulls);
- Checking in with participants; and
- Remaining neutral.

Building Rapport

Participants are most likely to contribute when there is a safe and open environment and building rapport – the feeling of mutual trust or respect – can help establish a safe focus group environment. Rapport does need to be built and does not happen instantly, but there are a number of simple steps that facilitators can use to build rapport, even before the focus group starts. First, whenever possible address participants by name. Facilitators may use name tags, seating assignments, or other memory aids to assist them to use participants' names.

Tip #20:
As participants introduce themselves, write down their names in a little map of where they are sitting. This will give you a guide to help remember participant's names without using name tags!

Facilitators can also build rapport by demonstrating 'active listening.' Active listening indicates you are paying attention to participants' comments and is demonstrated by subtle behaviors like leaning forward and nodding in appropriate places to encourage sharing. Maintaining eye contact with participants as they are sharing their experiences is also important; doing so is an active listening technique and helps build rapport. In general, the facilitator can demonstrate active listening and build rapport by attending to participants as they share their experiences; if the facilitator is thinking about something other than what the participant is saying they are not actively listening.

Being Direct

Good facilitators have learned how to manage the focus group conversation without a participant or small number of participants dominating the conversation. It is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that all participants' responses are acknowledged and balance encouraging those who are quiet or inactive without discouraging those who are talkative or active. Management of the conversation will occur if the facilitator uses the active listening techniques described above, but if problems occur the facilitator may need to employ techniques specific for their unique situation.

If a small number of participants are dominating the conversation, the facilitator can use very respectful language to transition from those participants who are dominating the conversation to other participants who may not have shared. Either of the statements below, or a variation thereof, can smooth the transition between participants who are dominating the conversation and transition to one or more participants who may have contributed sparingly or not at all.

- *"Thank you, Aaron, for sharing that. We've heard a lot from you today (or: on this item) and I'd really like to hear from others as well."*
- *"Thank you, Beth, for sharing; that's really helpful. I'd really like to get input from other folks; Carlos, what were your experiences with …?"*
- *"Thank you, Destiny, for sharing that. Elijah, did you have a similar experience?"*

The above comments can also be very useful to elicit comments from those participants who prefer to wait to be called upon before contributing their thoughts.

Occasionally, focus group participants may have distracting side conversations, usually when the participants know each other prior to the focus group event. If a side conversation occurs, the facilitator has a couple of options to address the issue. First, the facilitator can simply ask participants to share what they were just discussing. In most cases asking participants to share with the larger group will limit the side conversations and the focus group conversation can proceed. A second option that is very direct is for the facilitator to stand up, walk over to the participants who are having the side conversation, and stand behind them. This option is very effective and generally quells future side conversations, but is only an option when the facilitator has the space to walk around the room. Last, the facilitator may choose to turn their back on the individuals who are having side conversations.

☞ Tip #21:
Side conversations between focus group participants can be very districting to other participants ***and,*** if the conversations continue unchecked, can dramatically reduce the data obtained from focus group participants.

Using Reflection

Reflection is a clinical technique in which participants' comments are repeated-or 'reflected'- back to them. When facilitators can accurately reflect comments back to participants it demonstrates that the facilitator was listening to the participant. But the reflection process also encourages expansion of ideas that have just been shared. As a result, reflection not only demonstrates the facilitator's active listening, but also acts as a probe and encourages participants to expand on their earlier thoughts.

☞ Tip #22:
Useful phrases in the reflection process include:

- Thank you for sharing about X; it sounds like you had a very negative experience with…
- Cathy, you mentioned earlier that…

Probing with Questions

The facilitator's role is to keep the conversation going and interrupt participants as infrequently as possible. However, probing questions can be useful because they can help clarify a participant's response, encourage participants to share additional details, or encourage alternative view points from other participants. Examples of probing questions are shown in Table 8 below. As can be seen in the table, there are a number of probing questions facilitators can use to encourage participants to share their thoughts or ideas.

Table 8. Example Probing Questions

Probe Type	Example Questions
Clarify a response	• *"Can you say more about that …"* • *"Can you share an example …"*
Elicit additional details	• *"What experiences have made you feel that way?"* • *"Is there more you'd like to share?" or "Is there more you'd be willing to share?"*
Encourage alternative view points	• *"Has anyone had a different experience?"* • *"Does anyone see it differently?"* • *"What about other points of view?"*

Being Comfortable with Silence

Experienced focus group facilitators have learned to be comfortable with silence or a pause in conversation. They understand that they have a script, but the participants do not. And experienced facilitators know that silence can be a good thing; it can indicate that participants are gathering their thoughts or politely waiting for the conversation to begin. So facilitators know that silence and pauses do not necessarily mean that something is wrong with the script item or the participants.

One helpful strategy is for facilitators to mentally count to 10 after they finish reading a script item. If participants do have something to share, they can begin the conversation when they are ready. But if the facilitator reaches '10' before a participant begins sharing, the facilitator's next step will likely depend on where they are in the focus group script. If the facilitator has asked a question for the first time and counts to 10 and no one has begun sharing, the facilitator can ask the participants if they need the script item clarified. The facilitator can then decide whether to rephrase the question, use an example, or ask a follow-up or probe question. But if the facilitator is inquiring for additional information and counts to 10 and no one has begun sharing, it is a good indication that the participants do not have any new information to share and the facilitator can move on to the next item in the script.

Checking-In

When facilitators *"check-in,"* they summarize the main discussion points that they have heard to the entire group. Checking-in is very useful for a number of reasons. First, checking-in demonstrates to the participants that the facilitator has been actively listening to participant's comments. Checking-in also gives participants an opportunity to offer clarifying comments; if the facilitator or the note taker has misunderstood or mis-stated a discussion point, participants can clarify the point. Checking-in also provides the facilitator and the note taker to verify that their understanding of the discussion is in alignment. Last, checking-in is often a useful transition point. Facilitators can summarize the main discussion points, ask for any additional comments, then transition to the next item in the script.

Tip #23:
Useful phrases for checking-in include:

- "What I'm hearing is …"
- "So far we've discussed …"
- "Here's what I've heard …"

Remaining Neutral

Effective facilitators will encourage all types of responses without endorsing or reinforcing one perspective or point of view. For that reason, it is very important that facilitators avoid saying things like *"correct,"* "*excellent,*" *"good,"* *"I can't believe it,"* or *"right."* Those words and phrases are subjective and could send the message that the facilitator is looking for *"right"* answers and may discourage participation from individuals who have had different experiences. Instead, facilitators should use phrases that acknowledge all participants' contributions and maintain neutrality. Example non-neutral and neutral phrases are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Examples of Non-Neutral and Neutral Forms of Encouragement

Non-Neutral	Neutral
• *"Correct"* • *"Excellent"* • *"Good"* • *"Right"* • *"I can't believe it"*	• *"Thank you" or "Thank you for sharing"* • *"Ok"* • *"Go ahead"* • *"Would anyone else like to share their experience?"* • *"That's very helpful; thanks"*

Chapter 6: Overcoming Facilitation Challenges

In this chapter, we will address the following questions:

- *What are some comment facilitation challenges? How is each addressed?*
- *How does a focus group get "closed"?*

Occasionally facilitators may experience challenges in facilitating the focus group. One of the best ways to manage the challenges is to understand what could occur during a focus group and proactively planning to manage each. Below are some challenges a facilitator might face and suggestions for their resolution.

What if the meeting space is inadequate?

An inadequate room—in terms of size, layout, privacy, or other issues—can spoil even the best-planned focus group. Prevention is the best prescription for avoiding location problems. If possible, the facilitator may wish to visit the room before scheduling the group; if that's not feasible, providing concrete, written requirements to the location coordinator can help ensure the room will be adequate. In addition, when the facilitator (and note taker, if applicable) arrives 30 minutes prior to the focus group, they can make last-minute adjustments to the space including moving tables and chairs. If making adjustments to the space is insufficient, then it may be possible to request a room change. Requesting a room change should be done as soon as possible so that participants can be directed to the correct room for the focus group and the focus group can still begin on time. Arriving early will allow the facilitator to make any last minute adjustments (including, if needed, room change requests) and still allow the group to begin on time.

What if there are technology issues?

In general, preparation and planning are the best strategies for preventing technology malfunctions during a focus group. As described in Chapter 1, all technology—equipment and software—should be tested prior to the focus group to ensure that the technology works seamlessly. The facilitator and/or note taker should pack extra batteries, power cords, and surge protectors to ensure that the technology configuration will be adequate for the room. And, as soon as the facilitator arrives at the focus group location, the technology should be set up and re-tested to ensure that the technology will work in the event space.

And the facilitator should have back-up plans for all technology which might present a challenge. For example, if the facilitator plans to project an image or information during the focus group, some back-up system (e.g., printed materials, flip chart presentation) should be in place so that, if the projector presents a challenge, the focus group participants can still see and respond to the information. Back-up systems will likely include printed materials, flip charts and paper and pens.

What if no one shows up to the focus group?

If no one shows up to the focus group, it might be useful to double-check the invitation to verify that all of the information was correct. For example, if the invitation indicates that the focus group will be held on *"Tuesday the 20th,"* is the 20th a Tuesday or a Wednesday? Errors in the invitation can lead to problems on the day of the focus group, so it is very important that the invitation and all follow-up documents are accurate. In addition, if the facilitator obtained participants' contact information during the planning process, the facilitator can then contact the participants to determine if they are running late, have forgotten about the focus group. The facilitator could interview participants as an alternative to the focus group. While the interview and focus group formats are not interchangeable, if the facilitator interviews the participants at least some data is collected.

What if only a few participants show up to the focus group?

If one or two participants arrive to the focus group then the facilitator may wish to interview the participants instead of holding the focus group. A focus group with only two participants can often feel awkward for the participants, so interviews can be a useful alternative. However, if 3 or more individuals show up, then the focus group can proceed as planned. Although a focus group with only 3 participants may feel small, but the conversation is often lively and can yield valuable information. In addition, many participants feel more at ease in a smaller group and may open up and share more in the smaller group than they would in a larger group.

What if participants show up late?

How the facilitator responds to late arrivals may depend on timing, or the point in the script the facilitator has reached. Have the late arrivals entered as the facilitator has started the ice breaker, or have they arrived when the facilitator has asked the “anything else” question? If the participant arrives during the ice breaker question, or earlier, then it may make the most sense to allow the late arrival to join the focus group, participate, and receive incentives (if any). If the participant arrives after the ice breaker, however, their arrival could be disruptive to the focus group. The late arriving participant may wish to discuss topics which the group has already covered or spend precious focus group time explaining the reason for their late arrival. As a result, it is important to have a plan to minimize the disruptions from a late arriving participant. If a note taker is present, they can usher the late arriving participant out of the room; once outside the note taker can obtain contact information from the participant to schedule an interview at a later date and answer any questions the participant may have. If no note taker is present, then the facilitator will have to temporarily suspend the focus group in order to have a brief conversation with the late arriving participant. Note that it is important for the facilitator to offer an interview to those participants who arrive late; doing so allows the participant the opportunity to share their experiences, provide feedback, and earn an incentive.

What if uninvited guests show up to the focus group?

Occasionally, focus group participants may be accompanied by uninvited adults or children. If the guest is an adult, the facilitator may wish to screen them to determine if they are a potential focus group participant. If the guest meets the criteria used to select focus group participants, no potential conflict of interest existsthere is sufficient space in the room, and there are sufficient incentives (if used) for all participants, then the facilitator may find it useful to invite the guest to share their experiences in the focus group. However, if the adult guest does not meet the criteria for focus group participation, then the facilitator should suggest that the guest wait outside the room. While this may feel rude, there are two important reasons for asking non-participating guests to wait outside: non-participating guests may not feel that they have to adhere to any confidentiality protocols and their presence may inhibit others in the room from participating in the focus group. So asking adult guests to wait outside the room will protect participants’ confidentiality and make it less likely that their presence will inhibit participation.

If the uninvited guest is a child, the facilitator may want to consider allowing the child to remain in the room because, in most cases, parents would be unable to participate otherwise. In general, many children five years of age or older can entertain themselves during the focus group, although babies and toddlers can be quite disruptive. If the facilitator is concerned that small children may disrupt the focus group, they can offer to interview the parents/guardians at a later time, with incentives if they have been offered.

What if there is no conversation?

It is rare that, in a focus group of 8-10 people, no want contributes to the conversation, but it does occasionally happen. The facilitator can directly call upon focus group participants and ask for their input. Asking participants to share their thoughts may help put participants at ease and set the stage for fuller participation for the remainder of the focus group. If the facilitator finds that none of the participants actively share in the conversation, they have several options to draw participants out and eliciting a conversation, including ‘round robin,’ ‘write-then-share,’ or ‘paired sharing.’

- **Round robin.** The facilitator can use a ‘round robin’ approach in which each participant takes a turn and shares their thoughts for each item on the focus group script. Again, the personal invitation for each participant to share their ideas can put all participants at ease and result in fuller discussion throughout the remainder of the focus group.
- **Write-then-share.** Facilitators may also find the ‘write-then-share’ approach to be useful. In the write-then-share approach, after the facilitator reads a script item, participants are encouraged to briefly write down their thoughts on a sheet of paper. Once thoughts were written down, the facilitator encourages participants to share what they have written. One advantage of the write-then-share strategy is that participants are given the time to develop their thoughts, organize them, and prepare before their thoughts are actually shared. In order for the write-then-share approach to be effective, the facilitator needs to have sufficient paper and pens for the participants as well as writing surfaces.
- **Paired Sharing**. Facilitators may wish to use the ‘paired sharing’ approach. In paired sharing, the facilitator reads a script item to the participants who then pair off. In their pairs, participants share their thoughts of the script item with each other then with the larger group. Paired sharing works particularly well with sensitive topics because participants can share their thoughts and learn their partner’s thoughts before sharing with the larger group; sharing thoughts with one other person helps participants overcome any apprehension about sharing their thoughts with a larger group.

What if there is too much conversation or the conversation is off topic?

In general, the facilitator’s objective is to strike a balance between lively and productive conversation among participants and accomplishing all items on the focus group script. So when participants spend more time on a topic than the facilitator had planned for the facilitator faces a tough choice: do they let participants fully exhaust the topic or do they interrupt and ask participants to move on to the next topic? There are a number of factors which can contribute to the facilitator’s decision making including where the group is in the script, the facilitator’s confidence that script items will be covered without explicitly asking script questions, the importance of later script items, and the amount of time remaining for discussion. There are no ‘rules’ for making this decision so, ultimately, the facilitator will have to make a decision that they feel is best in a very short time frame. In an earlier chapter, the need for the facilitator and note taker to discuss and prioritize script items was reviewed. The facilitator may wish to rely on that prioritized list in making their decision of whether to allow participants to continue discussing the topic or moving on to the next topic.

On the other hand, if the conversation begins to veer off topic the facilitator should step in and direct the conversation back to questions on the focus group script. It is important that the facilitator acknowledge participants’ willingness to share while directing them back to the task at hand. For example, the facilitator might say, *“It’s wonderful that you have so much to share about [the topic] and if we have time later we can discuss it more fully. Right now I’d like to get back to [the original question].”* Using this approach demonstrates respect for participants’ thoughts and experiences but also respectfully re-directs them to the script item(s). Of course, if time permits the facilitator should bring the group back to the off-topic discussion points and provide the group sufficient time for discussion before wrapping up the group. No matter which direction the facilitator chooses, time must be allocated for a proper wrap up. The facilitator should never end a focus group without a wrap up.

Chapter 7: Taking Field Notes

In this chapter, we will address the following questions:

- *What are ‘field notes’?*
- *What options are available for taking field notes?*
- *How do the options for taking field notes compare?*

What are ‘field notes’?

Field notes are taken during the focus group. Regardless of the format, field notes are a record of the focus group event including comments made to specific script items, the demographic characteristics of the participants, and impressions or observations made during the focus group. It is the note taker’s responsibility to accurately and completely capture the focus group event, to the best of their ability, while taking the field notes.

Regardless of which note taking format is used, there are note taking norms to follow. It is not vital to provide an exact dictation of the conversation, nor is it essential to record exactly who said what during the discussion (i.e., names of participants do not need to be attached to their comments). It is, however, important to summarize main ideas and point of views that surface during the conversation. It is also helpful to include any impression or observations made during the discussion. For instance, note takers can note who was most talkative, which questions made people uncomfortable, or which questions were the hardest to answer. Example quotes and personal stories are important to capture to provide depth and context to the summary of the focus group. It is also important to note if everyone in the group shared one experience or agreed with overarching statements or themes. For example, if in a focus group the majority of participants say they gained the most from Webinar 3, but two participates gained more from Webinar 1 in the focus group notes it would be important to note the majority opinion (i.e., Webinar 3), but also the minority opinion (i.e., Webinar 1).

In addition, effective focus group reports include some information about who participated in the focus group. This means that participants’ demographics should be recorded. Note takers should take a moment or two to record the number of males and females who participate in the focus group as well as any other important demographic information. The note taker has several options available to them to record participant demographics, but two of the most common are (a) a demographics table, or (b) an attendance sheet. Figure X below shows an example demographics table that might appear at the top of the form the note taker is using. The note taker can use the table to record the name of the event at which the focus group took place; the date, time, and location; the names of the focus group team; and important demographic characteristics of the focus group participants. As participants enter the room or as they introduce themselves at the beginning of the focus group, the note taker would use tic marks to record demographic frequencies. The advantages of using a small table like the one shown in Figure 2 is that the table is small and unobtrusive; the note taker can record information discretely. Unfortunately, if a mistake is made it may be difficult to track down so the note taker may have to erase all of the tic marks and begin again.

Figure 2. Example Demographics Table

Focus Group Notes Form

Conference or Event: ____________ Facilitator: ____________
Location: ____________ Notetaker: ____________
Date & Time: ____________
Total Number of Participants:
Men: ____________ Women: ____________
Deaf/Hard of Hearing: ____________ Hearing: ____________

Alternatively, the note taker may wish to use an attendance sheet like the one shown in Table 10 below. This attendance sheet would include a column for names of those who agreed to participate in the focus group, and a column for each demographic variable of interest. The note taker would circle a value (e.g., "M" for male or "F" for female) for each demographic variable for each participant. The advantage of using an attendance sheet like the one shown in Table 10 is that it is very easy to keep track of information, but the note taker does need an additional sheet of paper for recording purposes and is somewhat less discrete when recording attendance and/or demographic information.

Table 10. Example Attendance Sheet for Recording Demographics

Name	Attended?	Gender	Status
Anne Bancroft	Y N	M F	D A
Basil Fawlty	Y N	M F	D A
Bonnie Parker	Y N	M F	D A
Clyde Barrow	Y N	M F	D A
Douglas Adams	Y N	M F	D A
Edina Monsoon	Y N	M F	D A
George Washington	Y N	M F	D A

Field Note Options

There are three basic options for taking field notes: flip charts, audio/video recording, or hand recording. Each of the options, including their strengths and weaknesses, are described more fully below.

Flip charts. Flip charts are large tablets of paper for recording information; when the page is filled it is flipped over so that a new sheet can be used. Some flip chart tablets have adhesive on the back of each page so that pages can be removed from the tablet and adhered to the wall. During the focus group the facilitator would direct the discussion while the note taker recorded main ideas on the flip charts for later analysis and summary.

Flip charts can be particularly useful when the objective of the focus group is to brainstorm new ideas or collect or organize main ideas. Flip notes are very public—all of the participants can see what is written on each—and the public nature of flip charts makes them quite accurate. If an error is made recording information, participants can speak out and the notes can be adjusted. But just because flip charts are accurate does not necessarily mean they are complete. It is difficult to record an entire conversation on flip charts while the conversation is happening. In addition, it is quite difficult to record quotes; the note taker cannot stop the conversation to accurately and completely write down a quote. And while the note taker is taking field notes on the flip chart, they have no discrete way of recording observations of the discussion; as a result, secondary or supportive notes (another note taker or audio or video recordings) are important.

Table 11. Strengths and Weaknesses of Flip Chart Field Notes

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Useful for brainstorming • Useful for collecting main ideas • Accurate, because they are public	• Less detail; incomplete • Lack of quotes • Note taker cannot record impressions, observations • Require secondary or supportive notes to improve detail

Recordings as field notes. Note takers can also use audio or video recordings of the focus group conversations for field notes. The recording device would be set up prior to the beginning of the focus group and the conversation would be recorded as it unfolded. Although the audio or video recordings will capture the focus group conversation, it is still important that a note taker is present during the focus group. The note taker will be responsible for recording participants' demographics and making observations about the focus group conversation.

As described in an earlier chapter of this manual, if the focus group team plans to make audio or video recorded field notes, it is important to test and re-test the hardware and software to ensure that all devices and software are compatible prior to the day of the focus group. In addition, recording focus groups—whether audio or video recordings are made—has implications for Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Prior to planning for audio or video recordings, the focus group team should research standards and protocols maintained by their IRB for the type of focus group (e.g., evaluation vs. research; internal use vs. published/shared) they plan to conduct. Although IRB standards and protocols differ somewhat across institutions, at a minimum the focus group team should be prepared to explain to members of their IRB the purpose of the focus group, how the results will be used (e.g., internal use vs. published/shared), how participants confidentiality/anonymity will be protected, and how the security of recordings and transcripts will be maintained, including eventual destruction of both.

With an audio or video recording of a focus group, the focus group team has two options for preparing and organizing the field notes for analysis: transcript-based notes or tape-based notes. The transcript-based notes are a word-for-word rendition of the focus group event. Transcript-based notes are generally very accurate and very complete; unless there was a momentary glitch in the audio or video recording, the transcript based on the recording will capture the entire conversation. Because transcript-based notes are so accurate and so complete, analysis is quite easy as is the identification of illustrative quotes. In addition, transcript-based notes can easily be exported into some qualitative data analysis software for analysis. Unfortunately, transcripts are very time consuming; 1 minute of an audio recording takes between 2-4 minutes to accurately transcribe, depending on the skills of the transcriptionist. In addition, transcripts are costly; professional firms will charge between $120 and $240 for transcribe one 60-minute focus group. And if the transcription is made in-house, there are hidden costs for transcribing the focus group; staff will have to set aside their primary responsibilities in order to have sufficient time to transcribe the recording.

Tip #24:
Transcripts are incredibly useful because they are both accurate and complete. But if your program has limited funds, consider using one of the other options for taking field notes.

Tape-based notes are a less-costly alternative to transcript-based notes. With tape-based notes, the note taker would review the audio or video recording after the focus group and construct a set of notes of the event. Note that the tape-based notes are *not* a transcript; they are an abridged or paraphrased summary of the focus group. In other words, the note taker would review to a brief portion of the recording then summarize the conversation and repeat those two steps until the end of the focus group conversation. The notes would then be supplemented by observations made during the focus group. Advantages of the tape-based approach are that the notes are a complete and accurate rendition of the focus group and that quotes can be retrieved at any time, but the tape-based approach still requires time to complete.

Tip #25:
When making tape-based notes, you may want to make notations for the time at which script items or major discussion points occur. This will make tracking down clarifying information or quotes much easier!

Hand recorded field notes. Hand recorded field notes refer to field notes that are either hand written (i.e., using paper and pen) or recorded on a computer. An example of hand recorded field notes can be found in Appendix B. One benefit of using hand recorded field notes is that it is more cost-efficient than a recording; the field notes are essentially completed when the focus group is done. In addition, hand recorded field notes are less obtrusive than audio or video recordings. Some focus group participants may be inhibited by the presence of recording devices but less inhibited by the note taker making hand recorded field notes. Hand recorded field notes also have fewer IRB implications than recordings. Unfortunately, there are also several potential weaknesses for hand recorded field notes. First, hand recorded field notes are generally less accurate and less complete than audio or video recordings. It is a simple fact that those taking hand recorded field notes miss some of the event. Second, it can be difficult to distinguish between paraphrased ideas and direct quotes in the field notes. This can be problematic when summarizing the focus group: can the note taker include a quote without verification that it is, in fact, a quote? Last, it can be a challenge to juggle recording the conversation with recording observations. It is easy to miss important contributions to the focus group while recording an observation and vice-versa.

For paper and pencil field notes, the note taker should edit the electronic copy of the focus group script so that one question appears at the top of each page of the document. Once the file is printed, the pages should be stapled together to ensure that the notes can be recorded in order. During the focus group the note taker can record both the conversation and their observations on the printed copy of the script. The note taker may find it helpful to mark changes in topics with asterisks (*), stars, or bullets to highlight major topics of discussion. In addition, the note taker can use simple notation systems (e.g., "2x") to indicate agreements between participants. For example, in Appendix B "underused (2x)" indicates that two focus group participants responded with "underused." Notational systems like these can speed up paper and pencil note taking.

Tip #26:
When using paper and pencil field notes, the note taker should have plenty of writing implements to ensure that a broken pencil led or a pen with no ink does not disrupt the note taking process.

Tip #27:
If the focus group is held in a new or unfamiliar location, bring along a portable, hard writing surface like a clipboard or book just in case there is no table for writing. Having a portable hard surface will ensure that the handwritten notes are legible later.

If the note taker will be using a computer to take the field notes they should prepare an electronic copy of the focus group script to facilitate note taking. It is helpful to add 5-6 lines between each script item and format those lines to automatically bullet the entered text. This will speed up the note taking process – the note taker can type comments and use the enter/hard return key to indicate changes between major discussion points. In addition, the electronic document should be placed on the computer's desk top so that it is easily accessible to the note taker. Then, when the facilitator and note taker are setting up for the focus group, the note taker should open the document so that it is ready for information entry. As the focus group progresses the note taker can enter information to the electronic file and save the file *often*. Doing so will minimize the chances that a problem with the application or a power surge will interfere with the note taking process.

Tip 28:
If you are using a computer or laptop to take focus group notes, ***save the file often!*** Doing so minimizes the chances you will lose your notes to a crashing application or power surge.

In addition, the note taker may wish to prepare a back up system for note taking. If the note taker experiences a problem with an application, the focus group participants are not going to stop the conversation so that the note taker can catch up. But if the note taker has been proactive, they can use a secondary text application (e.g., Notepad) to continue to record the focus group conversation.

Regardless of the format, if the facilitator and note taker will be using hand recorded field notes, they should have a frank conversation about expectations for the notes. In particular, the facilitator and note taker should discuss what the resulting field notes should look like so that there are no surprises. That conversation should include:

- How much paraphrasing should be used?
- How many exact quotes are needed for the summary?
- Which transitions should be recorded (between participants, between topics, between facilitator and participants)?
- How important is it that the notes include punctuations?
- Should fillers (e.g., ‘umm’s, ‘aah’s, ‘like’s) be included?

In addition, if audio or video recordings will be transcribed, the facilitator, note taker, and transcriptionist should also discuss the above questions. Doing so will ensure that the facilitator and note taker receive the type of transcription they expect from their transcriptionist.

Hand recorded notes augmented by tape-based notes. In addition to the field notes strategies described above, it is possible to combine hand recorded field notes with a tape-based approach. To do this, the note taker would audio or video record the focus group *and* hand record the focus group using either the paper and pencil or computer methods described above. After the focus group, the note taker would then review the recording with the field notes; the note taker would use the recording to augment or enhance the hand recorded field notes by clarifying the field notes, filling in gaps, and adding quotes. This combination approach would require more time than just using hand recorded field notes but *less* time than a traditional tape-based approach because the note taker is not solely relying on the recording for the content of the focus group conversation. While the combination method is helpful for groups on a budget, because recordings are involved there will be IRB implications.

Tip 29:
Keep in mind that no method of taking field notes is perfect and each has its strengths and weaknesses. It is important for the focus group team-the facilitator and note taker- to match their note taking needs with the available options.

Chapter 8: Summarizing a Focus Group Event

In this chapter, we will address the following questions:
- *What is a 'debriefing,' and why is it important?*
- *How does one summarize a focus group event?*

Importance and function of the debriefing

A debriefing is a conversation between members of the focus group team-the facilitator and note taker-about the focus group including planning, participant selection, the script, and the focus group conversation. Although the exact topics of the debriefing are open to the needs and desires of the facilitator and note taker, some example discussion points might include:
- Did the space work for the focus group? What could be done differently in selecting and/or setting up the space for the focus group?
- After careful planning, were the focus group participants the right group for the topic?
- What changes could (or should) be made to the focus group script? Was the ice breaker effective and promoting conversation among participants?
- Were participants nervous?
- Did participants understand the focus group script?
- What were the facilitator's and the note taker's big 'take-aways' from the group?

The goal of the debriefing is to review the major components of the focus group process and to provide context for the results of the focus group. The facilitator's and note taker's reflection on the focus group process can provide important feedback for improving the planning of future focus groups and focus group scripts. In addition, the debriefing allows the facilitator and note taker to determine if they had the same impressions or observations about the focus group conversation. Because memories of observations and impressions tend to fade rather quickly, it is important for the facilitator and note taker to debrief with each other within 24 hours of the focus group.

Summarizing a focus group

Summarizing a focus group is one of the most important phases of conducting a focus group, yet it is often neglected. Converting the field notes into a summary provides organization and structure to the focus group conversation in a format that is easy to share with stakeholders and other interested parties. Again, because memories fade, it is important that the note taker complete the focus group summary within a week of the focus group event. Two common summary formats are the narrative summary and the visual summary.

Narrative summary. A narrative summary typically includes background information on participants, overall findings, and key findings by question; an example narrative summary can be found in Appendix C. At the top of the summary the note taker should briefly describe the participants and the focus group event. The summary should include the total number of participants and participants broken down by relevant demographic information. For example, in a focus group of students, one important demographic category would be grade in school while, in a bilingual focus group, one important category would be the number communicating via voice and ASL. The date and location of the focus group should also be shared and any other pertinent observations. For example, if participants were familiar with one another, if they were familiar with the facilitator or note taker, or if half of them arrived late, that information would be shared in the beginning paragraph.

The second section of the narrative summary is the overall findings. The overall findings usually consist of 4-5 bullets that summarize the entire focus group, including: participants' experience with the program, service, product, or policy, strengths or the biggest benefit, barriers or the greatest challenge, and suggestions for improvement. Because the overall findings represent the entirety of the focus group, this section will be written *last*, after the key findings.

Tip 30:
After the key findings have been summarized, write *one* bullet each for:

- Participants' experience with the program, service, product, or policy;
- Strengths or biggest benefit;
- Barriers or greatest challenge; and
- Suggestions.

The remainder of the narrative summary consists of a question-by-question summary of each script item. The script question is often bolded so that it can be quickly identified. Below the script question the note taker would summarize participants' major discussion points. When possible, the major discussion points would be illustrated by quotes; the quotes would be bulleted and italicized. This system for summarizing the key findings (bold question; discussion points in plain text; italicized and bulleted quotes) is very easy for readers to use and to find needed information. Again, once the key findings are completed, the note taker would write the overall findings.

Visual summary. One way to visually summarize a focus group question is through production of a 'word cloud.[3]' Word clouds work well with an ice-breaker question such as: "when you think of XYZ, what three words or phrases come to mind immediately?" For the "three words" ice breaker question, word clouds are particularly effective because word clouds emphasize word frequency: frequently mentioned words appear larger than words that are infrequently mentioned. An example word cloud of the contents of Chapters 1 and 2 of this manual can be seen in Figure 3 below. A second word cloud example can also be found in Appendix D (this word cloud corresponds to the narrative summary presented in Appendix C).

[3] Instructions for constructing a word cloud are presented in Appendix E.

Figure 3. Example Word Cloud

Word clouds provide a visual overview of the focus group conversation. Word clouds are not a substitute for a narrative summary nor is it comprehensive. Word clouds do not provide a means for sharing quotes and are limited to words rather than to phrases. However, if the focus group team is interested in an overview of the focus group conversation, word clouds are an excellent option for visually summarizing and presenting the results of an item on a focus group script.

Resources

Additional Information on Focus Groups

Family Health International – Chapter on facilitating focus groups (http://www.fhi.org/en/HIVAIDS/pub/guide/RapidAssessmentGuide/rag7.htm)

Garson, Dave. (Unpublished). *Focus Group Research.* http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/PA765/focusgroups.htm)

Harris, Basil (2009). *Tips & Tools: How to Run Customer Focus Groups Successfully.* (http://www.pragmaticmarketing.com/publications/magazine/2/5/0410bh)

Krueger, Richard A., & Casey, Mary Anne. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ISBN: 0-7619-2071-4

McNamara, Carson. (2006). *Basics of Focus Groups.* (http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm)

United Nations University Press. (http://www.unu.edu/unupress/food2/UIN03E/uin03e06.htm)

Software Resources

Word Clouds
http://www.wordle.net

Software (PC/Windows, Unix, Linux, Mac, handheld, mobile devices)
http://www.softpedia.com

Open Source Mac software
http://opensourcemac.org

Appendix A: Example Focus Group Script

XYZ Focus Group Script

Introduction/Welcome

- Thank participants for their participation in the focus group;
- The purpose of the focus group is to learn more about their experiences with the XYZ program and get feedback to make program improvements;
- Introduce focus group team;
- Will be recording today's focus group; before the recording starts, cover strategies to protect participants' confidentiality:
    - Eliminating personally identifying information like names, job titles, state and city names, etc.;
    - Will use quotes, but never identify the speaker; and
    - No one from XYZ will have access to today's recording or any transcript from the recording.
    - Please share as much as you feel comfortable.
- Incentive will be shared at the end of the focus group;
- Ground rules
    - May have to limit comments – want to make sure everyone has a chance to share
    - One person talking at a time so we can all follow conversation
- Questions?

1. When you think of XYZ, what three words or phrases come to mind immediately? They can be positive, negative, or neutral.

2. Please tell us about the usefulness of the XYZ events (professional development opportunities) you have utilized in the last 12 months. Can you tell me how these events were useful to you?
   <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>
   a) How have you use the information you learned from XYZ events in your current position?
   b) Which events did you find to be the *most* useful? Were some events more helpful than others?
   c) Which events did you find to be the *least* useful? How so?

3. Please tell us about the quality of XYZ's events. Can you tell me why the events you participated in were quality events?
   <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>
   a) Which events did you find to have the *highest quality*? What makes them high quality?
   b) Which events did you find to have *lower quality*? What makes them low quality?

4. Please share with us your feelings about the relevance of XYZ events to your current position. How were these events relevant to your work?
   <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>
   a) Was there an event(s) that was *most* relevant to your current position? If so, which event was that? What made that event highly relevant to your current position?
   b) Was there an event(s) that was *less* relevant to your current position? If so, which event was that?

What made that event less relevant to your current position?

5. How have you applied what you learned through XYZ events (professional development opportunities) at the individual level? What about at the systems level?

6. What recommendations do you have for XYZ to improve the usefulness, quality, or relevance of XYZ's events (professional development opportunities)?

7. XYZ provides events (professional development opportunities) on a wide variety of topical areas such as transitional services, technology use, post-secondary options, etc. When considering the areas that XYZ addresses in its goals, what additional professional development needs do you have?

8. Anything else?

Closing/Wrap-Up

- Questions?
- Thank every one for their participation;
- Valuable comments which will be shared with XYZ program staff;
- Remind them anonymity will be protected using strategies shared earlier; and
- Incentive distribution

Appendix B: Example Focus Group Field Notes

XYZ Focus Group Field Notes

Conference or Event:	MN State Conference	Moderator:	John Smith
Location:	St. Paul	Note taker:	Paulette Doe
Date & Time:	9/29/09		
Total Number of Participants:	10		
Men:	5	Women:	5

1. When you think of XYZ, what three words or phrases come to mind immediately? They can be positive, negative, or neutral.
   - Very Positive (3x)
   - MMOON
   - Assisting our school with language development.
   - Portfolios, but computer problems are very frustrating.
   - Very positive, because:
     - Support
     - Connection with peers
     - Trying innovative technology
     - Very innovative trying new technologies
     - Resume building
     - Virtual campus
     - iMoveAlong (2x)
     - Underused (2x)

2. Please tell us about the usefulness of the XYZ events (professional development opportunities) you have utilized in the last 12 months. Can you tell me how these events were useful to you?

   <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>

   a) How have you use the information you learned from XYZ events in your current position?
      - I had the students present their portfolios in front of community members, staff, and our board members. They did a great job with the portfolios.

   b) Which events did you find to be the *most* useful? How so? Were some events more helpful than others? Why?
      - Most useful were, the teletrainings especially for video conferencing, remote captioning, video remote interpreting, and XYZ conference of 2008.
      - Portfolios were useful for preparing students for school-to-work.
      - Our Outreach Specialist when working with professionals and parents for technical assistance on any issues they were facing.
      - The iMoveAlong curriculum is going to change the thinking of the staff as to how we approach working with students to develop skills necessary for transition.

   c) Which events did you find to be the *least* useful? Why?
      - The iMoveAlong part of the curriculum that focuses on college preparation, because most

of our students who are in the school's MoveAlong program are not going to college.
- I don't remember, it was the third day of the training and we don't use it.
- The language level of the curriculum was too advanced for the students (2x).

3. Please tell us about the quality of XYZ's events. Can you tell me why the events you participated in were quality events?
    - Satisfied with the quality (5x)
        - Presenter knowledge and the hands-on work was as good as any workshop I have ever attended.
        - During the iMoveAlong training the speaker was excellent, and with the hands-on training it was a good quality event.
        - I have been only to one event and that was iMoveAlong training. The teachers were knowledgeable.
        - Attended one iMoveAlong training. Did hands-on it was awesome. It was great. There were a lot of hands-on to do computer work. Listen, then hands-on. We were able to work on things ourselves. When we struggled, we could ask questions. It was a good pace.
        - I feel the same as the others. We had iMoveAlong training for three days. The speaker was excellent and we had hands-on training. It was good quality.

    - Dissatisfied with the quality (2x)
        - Introduction to iMoveAlong training
        - Our school had a browser issue was not compatible with XYZ's online curriculum. So that is something that needs to be worked out for next year.
        - Everything else was perfect. It was great.
        - I felt that all of the presenters that I connected with were terrific, but at the end of the training, I wanted more. I would like to have the trainings done in 2 or 3 parts, and then you can continue to take advantage of the training. For example, with the remote training, I felt like I wanted more. I don't know if it is quality or not, but I wanted more. There could be a series focused on one topic. Follow up training, not just stop at the end of the training, but continue to work with the information that we learned. Work with participant in the implementation stage. (one other nodded head in apparent agreement)

    - Neutral
        - I don't know if it is quality or not but I wanted more. The presenter that I connected with was terrific, but at the end of the training I wanted follow-up training to continue to work with the information that was learned. I would like to see them work with the participants during the implementation stage (one other participant nodding head in agreement).

    <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>

    a) Which events did you find to have the *highest quality*? Why?
        - iMoveAlong training was a time of high quality because the teachers were knowledgeable, willing to answer questions, willing to slow down and help the people who were having trouble, and that would be me with technology.

    b) Which events did you find to have *lower quality*? Why?
        - Presenter spoke and signed at the same time, so it was not the same quality of presentation for the teachers who were deaf.
        - I attended one training to introduce iMoveAlong, but it was not in-depth. I would really like to learn more about it.

4. Please share with us your feelings about the relevance of XYZ events to your current position. How were these events relevant to your work?
    - iMoveAlong training was very relevant (5x)
        - Portfolio portion of iMoveAlong curriculum.
        - iMoveAlong curriculum prepares students to deal with the culture and the changes in their experience of college, as they are not really prepared to practice their own independence (2x) and self advocacy skills (one other person nodding head in agreement).
        - Training with remote technology, because last year I used remote captioning for the first time. Very relevant.

    <u>Probe questions if needed:</u>

    a) Was there an event(s) that was *most* relevant to your current position? If so, which event was that? What made that event highly relevant to your current position?
        - Most relevant training-pertained to retention and the students not quitting in the first year of their time in the university.

    b) Was there an event(s) that was *less* relevant to your current position? If so, which event was that? What made that event less relevant to your current position?
        - (No comments were directed towards what was less relevant).

5. How have you applied what you learned through XYZ events (professional development opportunities) at the individual level? What about at the systems level?
    - During the training, I became aware of the amount of students that drop out. I've been a little more vigilant with my students to make sure they are doing okay, and how to communicate. I'm now trying to get together a coalition, and reach out so that we can use it throughout the state.
    - On an individual level, I have learned so much through the online training and the conference. I guess the webinar trainings, and have taken advantage of it. On a systems level the only thing I can thing about is awareness within the IT department. They helped set up remote captioning. The XYZ and your service and remote services were never heard of before.
    - On an individual level, it was less stress (2xs) because I had to figure out how to teach people to do the resume, but now that this has been implemented, it is a really nice tool that I have been able to use. On an individual aspect it gave a lot of relief and less stress. On a systems level—very useful in my classroom. Because with my senior students, if they give the portfolio for their jobs, on Friday then they have different job applications with their resume or work behavior. So I use iMoveAlong on Friday. And I give one part of portfolio each week. My panelist's collective comments about the portfolio are really Amazing. That is what is really exciting to see. That is how I empathize with the students and their job; I am really impressed with the students work with the iMoveAlong portfolios.
    - It has been really helpful having teachers involved (3-4 head nods) helpful for transitional teachers.

6. What recommendations do you have for XYZ to improve the usefulness, quality, or relevance of XYZ's events (professional development opportunities)?
    - I would like to see training topics as a series so you don't just get the training and then you are done. Maybe even connect with a trainer as a support person for questions that will come up. I didn't go through the iMoveAlong training. But as a coordinator for a university I think it would be beneficial if we could collaborate with each other if one of the students have portfolio ready the

university can make sure that these transition services become more seamless.
- The browser at our school is not compatible with XYZ's online program, my IT person said that what happened last hear they implemented a new browser to access the online training, but they will not do it next year. So if XYZ can't change browsers and cannot make them compatible then we cannot use iMoveAlong, and that is unfortunate.

7. XYZ provides events (professional development opportunities) on a wide variety of topical areas such as transitional services, technology use, post-secondary options, etc. When considering the areas that XYZ addresses in its goals, what additional professional development needs do you have?
    - I've already see online coming up is the Career Services, that may apply to what I do. I am looking forward to any vocational-related, especially for students not going to college. I would like to have more of those assets-related to school-to-work (3x).
    - What's very difficult in the classroom is for high school teachers to work with the kids who are school to work kids. Working on applied academics skills for communication and math. We have vocational programs to work on job readiness. Some of that is applied experience in work settings. If there is a way to prepare teachers to better work with these kids. You don't find that training any place in college curriculum and it is all on the job training. Fortunate to have mentor but need to develop that kind of training for teachers. (One head nodding).
    - I would like to see professional development for program coordinators, more emphasis in VRI interpreting to set it up. How to collaborate with the development of Innovative approaches to new funding collaboration within the state, because the economy is affecting our programs.
    - Teacher programs do not have any training on how to teach job readiness skills to students, it would be nice to develop and provide this kind of training for our teachers.

8. Anything else?
    - Jane Smith, Outreach for Colorado was a valuable resource for us. We had a task force looking at standards for K-12 interpreters. Having her available to talk about XYZ services and to work on committees and these task forces that every state has to deal with is a huge benefit. Your staff can benefit schools in a lot of ways.
    - I wanted to add that I called the XYZ help desk a few times, and I always receive help and my questions have always been resolved. I am grateful for that. I am grateful to XYZ for the wonderful resources.

Appendix C: Example Narrative Summary

Summary of XYZ Focus Group

A focus group with 10 participants, 5 men and 5 women, was held on September 29, 2009 at the Minnesota State Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota. None of the participants appeared to be familiar with the others prior to the start of the focus group. All participants were familiar with the XYZ program.

Overall Findings

- In general, focus group participants had positive experiences with the XYZ program, especially for the professional development events and the iMoveAlong curriculum. Participants felt that, overall, the XYZ program provided events which were relevant to their work, useful, and of high quality.
- Focus group participants appreciated that trainers were responsive to their needs, but felt that when trainers spoke *and* signed there was a decrease in the quality of the presentation.
- The participants have used their new knowledge in their current position. At a systems level, participation in XYZ events has resulted in greater awareness of student-related concerns with other teaching staff or administrative/support personnel.
- Participants suggested that future training events be presented as a series with support provided to assist participants to seamlessly integrate training knowledge into their work, and to adjust the iMoveAlong software so that it was compatible with a wider range of browsers.
- Participants would like more effects to support and inform professionals in their work with students transitioning from school directly to work.

Key Findings

1. **When you think of XYZ, what three words or phrases come to mind immediately? They can be positive, negative, or neutral.**

   Most focus group participants provided positive or very positive comments to the above question. Participants appreciated the support they received, their connection with peers, and the iMoveAlong curriculum. Participants also felt that the XYZ program was underused and could be marketed more effectively so that others could take advantage of the available resources. Although most participants were very positive about the XYZ program, some noted that computer problems with the iMoveAlong curriculum were frustrating.

2. **Please tell us about the usefulness of the XYZ events (professional development opportunities) you have utilized in the last 12 months. Can you tell me how these events were useful to you?**

   None of the participants answered the core question; as a result all of the probe questions were asked. Only one participant shared how they have used the iMoveAlong curriculum – for students to present their portfolios to the community. Several focus group participants did share that they found a wide range of XYZ events to be useful including: teletrainings, portfolios, and XYZ staff. One participant also shared that the iMoveAlong curriculum will result in changes to staff thinking and how staff work with students to develop their transition skills.

   In addition, some participants felt the iMoveAlong curriculum was inappropriate for their students either because students were not planning for postsecondary education or because the language was too advanced.

- *"Portfolios were useful for preparing students for school-to-work."*
- *"The iMoveAlong curriculum is going to change the thinking of the staff … how we approach working with students to develop skills necessary for transition."*
- *"The language level of the [iMoveAlong] curriculum was too advanced for the students."*

3. Please tell us about the quality of XYZ's events. Can you tell me why the events you participated in were quality events?

The majority of participants were satisfied with the quality of XYZ events and found the presenters to be knowledgeable and very much appreciated the "hands on" approach that the presenters used. Participants also appreciated that presenters were responsive to requests to slow down and assist those having difficulty. Other participants indicated that, while they appreciated the information that was shared during the training event(s), they wanted more information and more training. In addition, at least one participant was dissatisfied with the quality of the XYZ events because there was an incompatibility between the software needed for the iMoveAlong curriculum and the software installed on available computers. And one focus group participant felt that when presenters spoke and signed at the same time there was a reduction in the quality of the presentation.

- *"I felt the same as the others. We had iMoveAlong training for three days. The speaker was excellent and we had hands on training. It was good quality."*
- *"Presenter spoke and signed at the same time, so it was not the same quality of presentation for the teachers who were deaf."*

4. Please share with us your feelings about the relevance of XYZ events to your current position. Were the events you participated in relevant to your work? How so?

All focus group participants felt that the iMoveAlong training was relevant to work in their current position. In particular, participants felt that their students benefited from developing portfolios, became better prepared to adapt to changes in culture they would experience when transitioning to a postsecondary educational environment, and were better able to self-advocate. Participants also felt that training events emphasizing student retention were most relevant to their work. None of the participants identified a training event that was not relevant to their current work.

- *"iMoveAlong curriculum prepares students to deal with the culture and the changes in their experience of college."*
- *"Portfolio portion of iMoveAlong curriculum."*

5. How have you applied what you learned through XYZ events (professional development opportunities) at the individual level? What about at the systems level?

On an individual level participants have utilized their knowledge in their current positions. Participants reported that using their new knowledge has resulted in less stress and improvements among students. Participants also shared that, at the systems level, their participation in XYZ training events has resulted in greater awareness of student-related concerns with other teaching staff or administrative/support personnel.

- *"It has been really helpful having teachers involved; helpful for transitional teachers."*
- *"On a systems level the only thing I can think about is awareness within the IT department … The XYZ and your service and remote services were never heard of before."*

6. What recommendations do you have for XYZ to improve the usefulness, quality, or relevance of XYZ's events (professional development opportunities)?

Only two individuals provided suggestions to improve XYZ events. One was to present training topics as a series with additional support provided. Participants felt that the additional support was important so that their new knowledge became seamlessly integrated into their work with students. The second suggestion was to adjust the iMoveAlong online software so that it was compatible with a wider range of browsers. Unless such a change was to be made, the participant would not be able to use the curriculum with their students in the upcoming year.

7. XYZ provides events (professional development opportunities) on a wide variety of topical areas such as transitional services, technology use, post-secondary options, etc. When considering the areas that XYZ addresses in its goals, what additional professional development needs do you have?

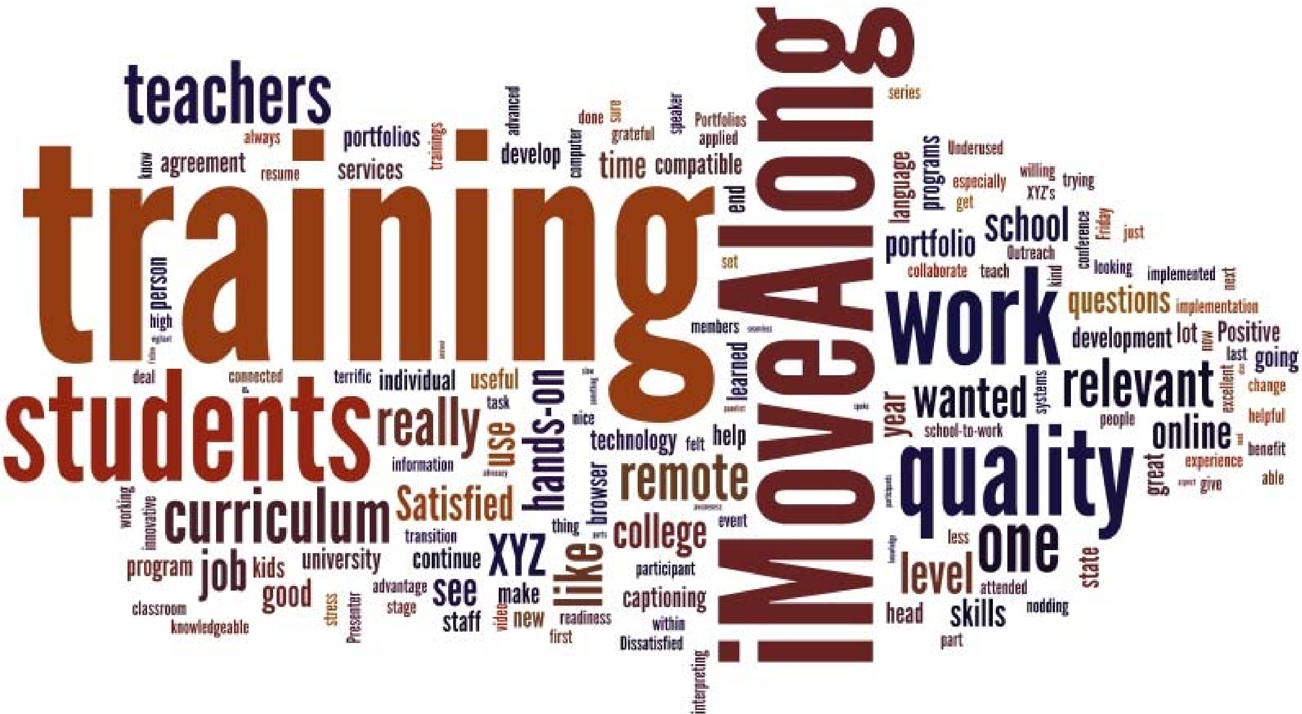
Participants would like more events to support and inform teachers of students who were transitioning directly from school to work. In particular, any training that could help teachers better prepare students with applied communication and math skills and job preparedness skills would be greatly appreciated.

- *"What's very difficult in the classroom is for high school teachers to work with the kids who are school to work kids … If there is a way to prepare teachers to better work with these kids. You don't find that training any place in a [teacher preparation] college curriculum and it is all on-the-job training."*
- *"I am looking forward to any vocational-related, especially for students not going to college. I would like to have more of those assets-related school-to-work."*

8. Anything else?

Two participants spoke to the responsiveness of XYZ to their needs. One participant felt that the outreach staff member was very beneficial while another participant spoke to the helpfulness of the help desk staff.

Appendix D: Visual Focus Group Summary



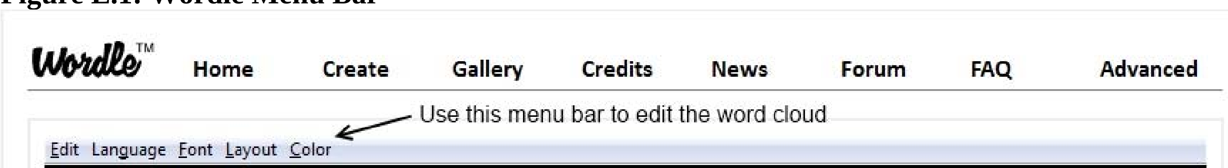
Appendix E: Creating a Word Cloud

1. **Prepare text for the word cloud**
    - Save file with new name (so that field notes/focus group summary remains intact)
    - Remove script items from the text file
    - Remove any extraneous text (e.g., extra returns)

2. **Go to the Wordle website, http://www.wordle.net**
    - Click on "Create your own"
    - Copy text from focus group and paste in window
    - Click "Go"

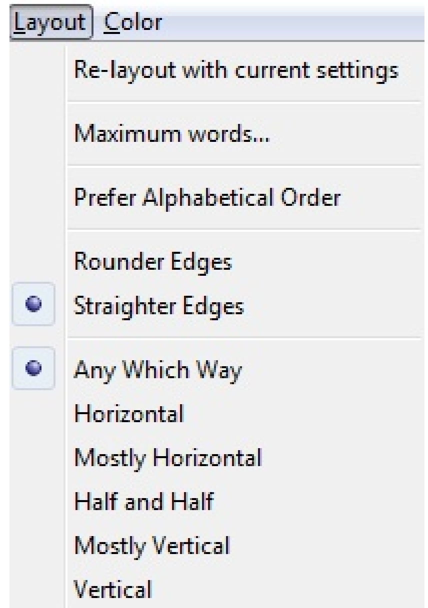
3. **Edit word cloud**
    - Use menu bar directly above the word cloud to edit the visual image; see also Figure E.1 below:

Figure E.1: Wordle Menu Bar

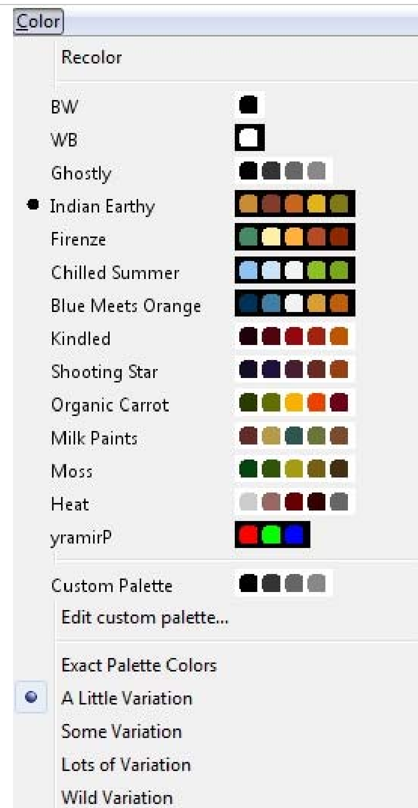


- "Font" will allow you to change the appearance of the font

- "Layout" will allow you to adjust the visual arrangement of the words:
  - The word cloud can be set to have "rounder" or "straighter" edges;
  - Words can be set horizontally, vertically, or in combination.
- Once desired settings are identified, the user can use "Re-layout with current settings" under the "Layout" command to find an aesthetically pleasing word cloud.



- "Color" will allow you to adjust the color settings.
- New colors can be selected:
  - For PowerPoint slides or other presentation software, light/white or dark/black backgrounds will both be effective;
  - For printed documents, light/white backgrounds are preferred.
- Degree of variation within a color palette can be adjusted (little, some, lots, or "wild" variation).



4. Make a "screen shot"

- **Instructions for PCs/Windows machines:**
  - At the same time, press CTRL + ALT + PRT SCR
    - The PRT SCR key is usually immediately above the BACKSPACE key
  - Open a graphics editing software
  - Paste
    - The pasted image should be the entirety of the window you saw when the three keys were pressed

        - The image will need to be edited (cropped down) to the word cloud
    - If you do not have graphics editing software:
        - Paint.NET is free and quite stable.
        - Available at: http://www.getpaint.net/download.html

- **Instructions for Macs Option 1: Make screen shot of entire screen**
    - At the same time, press Command (Apple) + Shift + 3
        - You will hear the sound of a camera shutter; this indicates the screen shot was taken
    - Open a graphics editing software
    - Paste
        - The pasted image should be the entirety of the window you saw when the three keys were pressed
        - The image will need to be edited (cropped down) to the word cloud
    - If you do not have graphics editing software, you can download free software here: http://opensourcemac.org/ (if you are a novice at editing graphics, try "Seashore" first)

- **Instructions for Macs, Option 2: Copy only the desired image**
    - At the same time, press Command (Apple) + Shift + 4
        - Your cursor will change to this: 
    - Use the cursor (click+drag) to select the image you would like to copy
        - When you release the mouse ("unclick") you will hear the sound of a camera shutter; this indicates the screen shot was taken
    - Open a graphics editing software
    - Paste (this should paste only be the part of your screen which you selected)
    - Use the graphics editing software to adjust the image. If you do not have graphics editing software, you can download free software here: http://opensourcemac.org/ (if you are a novice at editing graphics, try "Seashore" first)

5. **After graphics editing is complete, insert or paste the image in to the destination document or file**