3 Developing a Questioning Route

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Qualities of Good Questions and a Good Questioning Route
- Categories of Questions
- Strategies That Evoke Conversation
- Questions That Engage Participants
- Listening to the Brain or the Heart
- The Process We Use to Develop a Questioning Route
- Changing Questions: The Importance of Consistency

Developing good questions seems like it should be easy. But this is one of the areas where budding (and experienced) focus group researchers run into problems. Often, beginners generate interesting questions, but it isn't clear how answers to those questions will help achieve the purpose of the study. Or questions are phrased in ways that don't beg for discussion. As a result, researchers get simple yes or no answers. Or they develop a list of 30 questions to be answered in a two-hour group. Developing good focus group questions requires time, help from buddies, and attention to a few guidelines.

The series of questions used in a focus group study—the questioning route—looks deceptively simple. Typically, a questioning route includes about a dozen questions for a two-hour group. If you asked these questions in an individual interview, the respondent could probably tell you everything he or she could think of related to the questions in just a few minutes. But when these questions are asked in a group environment, the discussion can last for several hours. Part of the reason is in the nature of the questions and the cognitive processes of humans. As participants answer questions, their responses spark ideas from other participants. Comments provide mental cues that trigger memories or thoughts of other participants—cues that help explore the range of perceptions.

Asking questions is a foundational method of research, but there are circumstances and situations where the process is severely limited.

What happens if you ask a question and the person doesn't understand the question? Or if the person is embarrassed to answer? Or if the person feels the question is inappropriate for the environment?

For a successful interview, we must assume the following:

1. The respondent understands the question.
2. The environment is conducive to an honest answer.
3. The respondent knows the answer.
4. The respondent is able to articulate an answer.
5. The interviewer understands the answer.

If any of these links is broken, the quality of the interview suffers.

Questions that rely on memory

Focus group research relies on memory of past events, experiences, and conversations. This is different from natural science research, where there is an objective measurement that tells us quite precisely how much, when, and where an event has occurred.

Suppose an earthquake occurs. The natural scientist can tell us the epicenter, the severity (Richter scale), and the time when it occurred. If the instruments are accurate, there is no quibbling about these details. But another way to gain insight about the earthquake is by listening to those who experienced it. This would give us different information: the physical sensations they experienced, personal perceptions, emotions, and the insights of others around them. They socially construct the event and bring insight that was not available on the scientific instruments. Neither source of information is superior to the other. Both streams of information give us an understanding of what happened.

The focus group isn’t intended to give us measurements of the natural sciences, but it is quite effective in capturing the insights and experiences of individuals. An area that requires thought and preparation is how to best tap into the memories of participants. This is the challenge faced when developing the questions for a focus group. The questions are specifically designed to draw out memories and perceptions and to elicit conversation about the topic being studied.

Here are a few basic guidelines to consider:

1. *Do they really have the experience?* Be certain that the focus group participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied. If you are evaluating a past training event, did they actually attend? If you want to know the barriers to quitting smoking, have they been smokers? Too often we make assumptions without actually checking that each participant really belongs in the group.
2. *Are they ready for the discussion?* If possible, alert participants in advance of the focus group to do something and also record details. Perhaps you are asking parents about their child’s diet. If so, ask them to pay careful attention during mealtime the week before the focus group. Or, you want to talk about physical activity and exercise. You might ask them to keep a daily log of their physical activity in the week or two before the focus group. These requests help participants concentrate their attention on details that might otherwise be overlooked or missed.
3. *Can you use examples or artifacts?* Memory is improved when physical objects remind focus group participants of the experience. It might be an agenda of a past meeting, a photograph of an event, or a brochure on the topic of interest. Sharing these artifacts in the focus group helps people recall their experiences.
4. *Can the conversation enhance the memory?* When others in the group mention a past experience or perception, it may trigger memories for others. Allow time in the focus group for the topic to be discussed in some degree of detail to help others remember their own experiences.
5. *It is OK to see it differently*. Remind the participants that people may see and remember things differently. These differences are altogether reasonable and are to be expected. Encourage participants to share their perceptions even if they differ from what others have said.
6. *Opinions can change*. As a result of conversation, people may change their minds. The facts and experiences that others bring to the conversation may change the way others remember the situation. Be attentive to these changes. Listen for people saying that now they see it differently. Or you might just ask if they have changed their minds as a result of the conversation.

Qualities of Good Questions and a Good Questioning Route

Good focus group questions do the following things.

Evoke Conversation

The focus group is a social experience, and conversational questions help create and maintain an informal environment. We try to encourage participants to have a conversation in response to a question, building on one another's comments, rather than directing each comment to the moderator. But this usually takes time. The early questions in a focus group tend to be factual, and often the comments are directed back to the moderator. But then, slowly the questions begin to take on a conversational tone, and participants begin to talk to each other. The moderator becomes less central as participants build on the comments of others or compare their personal experiences. The advantages of a conversation are that it allows for more spontaneity, it relaxes the participants, and it creates a more natural atmosphere. But, the biggest advantage is that the most useful information typically comes out of these conversations when participants take the discussion to new and deeper levels. The disadvantages are that allowing for these types of conversations takes time, and the participants may not stay on topic.

Use Words the Participants Would Use When Talking About the Issue

Acronyms, jargon, and technical lingo are deadly—unless you are talking to a group of experts. Professionals are sometimes unaware that their language is not understood by everyone. They may inadvertently use technical terms or jargon that sounds highfalutin and confuse and put off lay audiences. To avoid this, have the questions reviewed by people similar to your participants to make sure the language is clear.

Are Easy to Say

Good questions are written so the moderator won't stumble over words or phrases. Some questions are great in written form but are awkward or stilted when asked orally. We see this occurring in a number of research studies when the questions are prepared by technical staff and then are given to the moderators to use in the focus groups. It is imperative that the words flow smoothly from the lips of the moderator.

Are Clear

When the question is asked, participants should understand what you're asking. This sounds pretty basic, but it is surprising how confusing some questions are. Sometimes moderators give long preambles to questions, or offer lengthy background, or use a long segue from one topic to another. Instead of clarifying the question, it is actually more confusing. Listeners may key on trivial phrases or words intended to build the case for the question, but these same phrases and words can confuse the focus group participant or take the discussion off on a tangent. Again, the question might be clear when one is reading it off the page but confusing when one hears it. When questions are unclear, they either don't make sense to the participant or they can be interpreted in different ways.

Are Short

Lengthy questions can be confusing to respondents. Participants have a hard time distinguishing the core intent of the question. In general, clarity decreases as the length of the question increases.

Are Usually Open-Ended

Open-ended questions are a hallmark of focus group interviewing. These questions imply that a few words or a phrase are insufficient as an answer. They beg for explanations, descriptions, or illustrations.

Are One-Dimensional

Inadvertently, moderators might include words that they think are synonyms but are seen as entirely different concepts by participants. While the moderator means well, the participants get confused. For example, "How was the program useful and practical to you?" For some *useful* and *practical* may be very different concepts. Other times moderators might add a second sentence or phrase that intends to amplify the question but confuses the respondents because it introduces another dimension. For example, "Which of these is most important to you? Or which should be acted upon first?" Again the moderator assumed that what was important should be acted upon first, but this may not be the view of participants.

Include Clear, Well-Thought-Out Directions

When asking participants to do something, provide clear instructions. For example, if you are asking participants to list something, do you want them to write it down on paper before they discuss? How much time should they take? Practice the instructions whenever the tasks are complicated, such as when using small breakout groups or activities that have multiple steps.

A Good Questioning Route

A questioning route is a list of sequenced questions in complete, conversational sentences. A good questioning route:

- Begins with a question that is easy for everyone in the group to answer
- Is sequenced so the conversation flows naturally from one question to another
- Starts with general questions and narrows to more specific and important questions
- Uses time wisely

Questioning route versus topic guide

There are two different questioning strategies used by focus group moderators: topic guide and questioning route. The *topic guide* is like an outline with a list of topics or issues to be pursued in the focus group. This list consists of words or phrases that remind the moderator of the topic of interest. By contrast, the *questioning route* is a sequence of questions in complete, conversational sentences. The topic guide tends to be used by professional moderators in marketing research studies, whereas the questioning route is often preferred in public-nonprofit and academic environments. The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are described in Chapter 2 of *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* (Krueger, 1998). We prefer the questioning route because it forces the moderator or research team to think about the words and phrases to be used ahead of time, and it helps the sponsor more clearly understand what will occur in the focus group. In addition, it increases consistency in the way questions are asked across groups.

Categories of Questions

Not all questions are equal. We use different types of questions at different times during the focus group. Each type of question has a distinct purpose. Some questions exist only to help people get prepared to answer later, more important questions. The moderator may move through some questions rapidly and devote more time to others. The level of importance influences the amount of time spent on the question as well as the intensity of the analysis. Not all questions are analyzed in the same way. Some questions, like the opening question of the group, may not be analyzed at all.

Essentially there are five categories of questions, each with a distinctive function in the flow of a focus group interview. We call these question categories opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending.

Opening Question

All participants are asked to answer the opening question at the beginning of the focus group. The purpose of the question is to get everyone to talk early in the discussion. The longer it is before someone says something in a group, the less likely he or she is to say something, so we want everyone to talk early in the group.

The opening question is designed to be easy to answer. And it should be easy to answer quickly (in about 30 seconds). Usually it is best to ask for facts as opposed to attitudes or opinions of participants at this point. Questions of attitude or opinion take time to answer, require examples or stories, and beg for discussion. The opening question is not a discussion question but strictly a process of getting everyone to talk early in the group. Opening questions typically aren't analyzed. The intent of the question is not to get information but rather to get people talking and to help people feel comfortable.

It is important that the question not highlight power or status differences among participants. We don't ask teenagers how old they are or what grade they are in because young people are very sensitive to age differences. We don't ask occupation or level of education. We don't ask farmers the size of their farming operations. We don't want to emphasize differences because some people may simply defer to others in the group who they feel are older, wiser, more experienced, or whatever.

Opening question

Here is an opening question that was used with dentists. “Tell us your name, where you practice dentistry, and what you most enjoy doing when you’re not practicing dentistry.” The question was easy to answer, established that all participants had dentistry in common, that they were all practitioners, and that they were human beings with interests, hobbies, and families.

Introductory Questions

Introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and get people to start thinking about their connection with the topic. Sometimes the introductory question asks participants to remember when they first experienced or encountered the organization or topic under investigation and to describe the experience. Or a question could ask people to describe how they use a product or service. Or, “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase . . .?” Introductory questions begin to give the moderator clues about participants’ views.

Transition Questions

Transition questions move the conversation into the key questions that drive the study. They serve as logical links between the introductory questions and the key questions. During these questions, the participants are becoming aware of how others view the topic. These questions set the stage for productive key questions. Often transition questions ask participants to go into more depth than introductory questions about their experiences and use of a product. While the introductory question surfaces the topic, the transition questions move the conversation closer to the key questions.

Key Questions

Key questions drive the study. Typically there are four to six questions in this category. These are usually the first questions to be developed by the research team and the ones that require the greatest attention in the analysis. It’s important for the moderator to know which questions are key questions. The moderator needs to allow sufficient time for a full discussion of these questions. While only a few minutes might be allocated for each of the earlier questions, the key questions may need as much as 10 to 20 minutes each. Furthermore, the moderator will likely need to use pauses and probes more frequently with key questions. Key questions usually begin about one-third to half of the way into the focus group.

Ending Questions

These questions bring closure to the discussion, enable participants to reflect back on previous comments, and are critical to analysis. Three types of ending questions are valuable: the all things considered question, the summary question, and the final question.

The all things considered question is used to determine the final position of participants on critical areas of concern. This question asks participants to reflect on the discussion and then identify which aspects are most important or most in need of action. Often we ask each person in the group to answer this question. Examples include: “Suppose you had one minute to talk to the governor on the topic of merit pay. What would you say?” Or “Of all the needs we discussed, which one is most important to you?”

This all things considered question is helpful in analysis because it is used to interpret conflicting comments and assign weight to what was said. Sometimes trivial concerns are talked about frequently during the focus group, and it can be a serious mistake if the analyst assumes that the concern discussed most frequently is the most important. If the analyst wants to know what participants consider important, then the moderator must ask that question, and one way to do that is to ask it as an ending question.

The summary question is asked after the moderator or assistant moderator has given a short oral summary (about two minutes) of the discussion. After the summary the participants are asked about the adequacy of the summary. This question also plays a critical role in analysis. The question can be asked in several ways, such as, “Is this an adequate summary?” Or “How well does that capture what was said here?” Or “If you were summarizing the conversation, what would you change?”

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

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

A questioning route

Here is the questioning route used in focus groups with parents. These parents had recently been involved with an intensive family therapy program, and the purpose of the focus group study was to evaluate the program.

Opening	1.	Tell us your name, and tell us how long you have been working with (name of family service or program).
Introduction	2.	How did you learn about this program?
Transition	3.	Think back to when you first became involved with this program. What were your first impressions?
Key	4.	What was the start-up process like for you?
	5.	What was particularly helpful about the services?
	6.	What was particularly frustrating about the services?
	7.	Is your child any different because he or she received these services? If so, how?
	8.	Is your family life any different because you received these services? If so, how?
Ending	9.	If you had a chance to give advice to the director of this program, what advice would you give?
	10.	We want you to help us evaluate these services. We want to know how to improve the service and what differences the service makes to kids and families. What did we miss? Is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?

Strategies That Evoke Conversation

Earlier we talked about the importance of conversational questions. These questions tend to produce additional insight as participants build on comments of others. Improving the conversational level in a focus group involves several components. They include the following:

Begin the Conversation Before the Focus Group Begins

As participants arrive the research team welcomes each individual and helps them get acquainted with other participants. In these moments before the focus group begins, the moderator might nudge participants toward a conversation. Avoid making declarative statements, and instead, pick a neutral topic and ask someone to offer their views. And then ask others if they have thoughts or experiences on this topic. Avoid politics, religion, and love lives.

Starting a conversation with teens

In a recent focus group with teens, the research topic was on nutrition and exercise. In an effort to get teens to begin sharing their views, we selected a neutral and fun topic for early discussion. We asked the question: “Who is making the best music today?” We might pick someone for the first answer and then turn to others and ask if they would like to share their views. Rather quickly we had the teens talking about music, performers, and entertainment. Just the experience of sharing a view on something easy and then listening to the views of others was great practice for the later focus group.

Have a Pocketful of Conversational Questions

As you meet and welcome participants to the focus group, be armed with several questions that promote conversation and encourage participants to tell short stories. “I love your necklace. What’s the story behind it?” Or, “Based on your cap, it looks like you’re a Twins fan. How are they doing?” Select a topic where they feel comfortable making a comment—a topic where they have some experience or insight. If you know they are parents, you might ask about their children, such as, “What are your secrets for getting children out of bed in the morning?” “What are your thoughts about having a designated bedtime for your children?” Or, ask about their names. “What’s the story about your name? Did your parents tell you why you were given the name you have?” The idea is to start a conversation from the time they come through the door. This makes people more comfortable and ready to share in the focus group.

Use a Checklist for Conversational Questions

As you think about potential conversational questions, here is a checklist that may help. Avoid questions that are obvious or controversial. Look for this instead:

- □ Does an answer quickly come to mind?
- □ Is it intriguing? Does it raise your curiosity?
- □ Do the answers of others interest you?
- □ Do people have experience with the topic?
- □ Do people feel encouraged to speak?

Use Strategies to Encourage Conversation

Ask the question and look at someone. Let your eyes linger on someone. Keep looking as they answer. Look at someone else as if you are expecting that person to talk. Or thank the first person and ask if someone else would like to comment. Don’t let others squelch the discussion. The moderator keeps the discussion moving and tries to keep one person from dominating the conversation.

Tell Them You Would Like a Discussion

Use a statement like, “We’d like to hear from everyone—we’d like to make this into a conversation, and it is OK to build on what others say or to present a different point of view.” You might comment on the importance of a discussion as you make your introduction and also later in the focus group if they need a reminder.

Pause and Look at Participants

Act as if you are waiting for others to share their views. You might be tempted to jump into the conversation, but control yourself. Use your eyes to signal others to talk.

Questions That Engage Participants

Up to now, we've discussed examples of questions that only required people to talk. Consider going beyond oral questions and using strategies that require greater involvement. This changes the pace of the focus group and can produce new and insightful information. People can be engaged in a variety of ways. Ask people to do things like listing, drawing, creating, arranging, and more. These engaging questions tap into different parts of the brain or heart. Some provide wonderful images and symbolism. Other questions are effective in eliciting emotional responses. Also participants often have fun with these questions.

Listing Things

Perhaps the easiest way to engage people in a different way is to ask them to make a list. This can be done in several ways. We typically ask them to jot down a list on a piece of paper. When everyone has completed a list, we ask them to tell us what they've written down. We then record the results on a flip chart. Sometimes we quickly categorize or sort the items as we place them on the flip chart. In other situations we might have the moderator or assistant moderator immediately record the results on the flip chart. The flip chart is valuable because it helps participants remember what has already been said. This listing process helps identify duplicate items and give a sense of how frequently items are mentioned. The silent listing on paper before transferring to the flip chart also affords the participants a few moments to reflect before they offer an answer. Consider these examples:

> "Think back to when you've had excellent customer service. What makes customer service excellent? Write your answers on a piece of paper. In a moment we'll share these with each other."
> "On the paper in front of you, jot down three characteristics of successful youth workers."

> "On the paper in front of you, jot down behaviors that tell you that your colleagues are not fully engaged in their work."

The list can be used simply to identify the range of responses. Or the list can be used to move to a deeper level. After the group has generated a list in response to "What makes customer service excellent?" the moderator can refer to the list and ask each person, "Which item do you consider to be the single most important on the list?" Or "If you had to pick one thing from this list that is most important to you, what would it be?" After circling each person's choice for most important, the moderator could focus the following discussion on those items that the participants chose as most important.

Be careful with flip charts

We use flip charts sparingly in focus groups because they can stifle conversation. People can talk much faster than a recorder can write. Sometimes participants will stop talking, so the recorder can finish writing down the idea. Also, people tend to offer phrases that are easy to list rather than longer, more descriptive examples that are usually much more useful during analysis. In addition, when the moderator stands in the focus group, the dynamics can change. Participants' attention focuses back on the moderator and breaks the conversation among participants. As a result, we selectively use flip charts to record answers to certain questions but never for the whole discussion. Later, in Chapter 6, we suggest a strategy of data capture that uses flip charts.

Rating Items

Rating scales can help identify which items should be discussed in more detail. Usually the researchers develop the rating scale; however, sometimes the criteria to be rated are developed by participants. The rating scale should be simple, and participants should be able to complete the exercise within a few minutes. Consequently, there is a limit to the number of items that can be rated. The idea behind the rating exercise is that each person rates a series of items without discussion, and then the results are tabulated and used as a basis for further discussion.

We prefer interval-appearing scales that we can code on a four- or five-point scale, for example:

Very satisfied = 5
Satisfied = 4
Neutral = 3
Dissatisfied = 2
Very dissatisfied = 1

This allows us to calculate a mean score quickly, which can be helpful in comparing a number of different items. Once tabulated we invite comments from the participants.

One variation of the rating approach is to ask participants to place colored dots on the flip chart or large sheets of paper displayed around the room. You could use three-quarter-inch dot stickers, small colored sticky notes, or markers. Each color corresponds to a rating. For example, you might use a five-point scale that corresponds to the colors of the rainbow: red = strongly agree, orange = agree, yellow = neutral, green = disagree, blue = strongly disagree. Participants are asked to place their dots, sticky notes, or marks on the flip chart that represents their views.

The flip charts must be easy to read from where participants are sitting. The color coding makes it easy for the moderator and participants to quickly see overall ratings. It is easier for people to quickly see trends if color ratings are used rather than numbers.

When finished with the rating, we ask participants to look over the completed sheets and offer comments. We may ask questions such as: “What patterns do you see?” “Is there anything that surprises you?” Or “Which item has the highest rating, and why was it rated so highly?”

At times there is value in asking participants to help develop the items to be rated. In these situations, keep the response scale constant, but have participants identify the items to be rated on their own. The researcher can then compare ratings of items and array these from high to low.

Suppose we are interested in how customers rate a local restaurant. We could use an instrument previously developed by the restaurant, and if we did so, we could compare results to earlier findings. But the predetermined scale might miss some critical elements of customer concern. Most often these rating forms ask about quality of food, quantity of food, speed of service, or friendliness of service. Suppose, however, that areas of greater concern to customers are parking lot congestion, food prices, presence or absence of smoking areas, or background noise. We suggest that you weigh the pros and cons of having criteria determined by the researcher versus criteria developed by participants. An advantage of using criteria developed by participants is that you get closer to their reality. The disadvantage is that these are difficult to analyze across groups when groups develop and rate different sets of items.

When participants have completed the exercise, the ratings should then be discussed. If you aren't going to discuss the results, then do the rating before or after the focus group, and don't waste time having it completed while the group is meeting.

Examples of response categories

When using a rating scale in a focus group, select response categories that are common. Examples include:

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Neutral

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Question involving rating—Report card

Here is an example used with students in a high school: “We’d like you to develop a report card for your school. You’re familiar with grades—A, B, C, D, and F—that you get for school subjects like English, history, and algebra. We want you to make a report card for your school, but you get to pick the subjects or the areas, and you get to give the grades. Pick subjects or things that are important to you. It could be something about people, the building, activities, or anything connected with the school. Pick subjects, and give each subject a grade from A to F. So, each of you take one of these cards, and make a report card for this school.” Once the students were done, they shared their lists and grades, which were recorded on a flip chart. Then students were asked to pick out and discuss things that were rising to the top—getting As. Then they were asked to pick those things that were failing. Students were then asked how the things that were failing could be improved.

There is a difference between rating and ranking

Rating and ranking are different concepts, and these words are not interchangeable. *Rating* means that you use a common scale and respondents assign a value. Often we use a 5- or 10-point scale or a scale that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. *Ranking* on the other hand means that you place items in an order or in a sequence. There is a first choice, a second choice, and so on. Rating scales are often considered to be interval data, and you can calculate a mean score. This is an advantage because then you have one number that represents the category. By contrast, ranking is considered an ordinal number and mean scores are not possible. Often rating scales are preferred because they offer a mean score and they are mentally easier than ranking exercises.

Choosing Among Alternatives: Pilot-Testing Ideas

This is a great use for focus groups. Participants are offered several choices, usually at least three but no more than five. The participants are then asked to look over the alternatives, talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each, what they like and don’t like and select the one that they like the best. In addition to making the selection and announcing the choice, the participants also offer a reason for why they decided the way they did and how that option could be improved. This strategy is often used in selecting from among visual displays, advertising layouts, promotional or educational materials, logos, or even program options. We’ve used this strategy to evaluate different delivery options for higher education in a community, to review proposed social service programs, and to get feedback on different formats for educational materials. In some situations the participants were given short descriptions to read. In others, participants watched short videos or reviewed materials or mock-ups. Participants discussed the options, asked questions, and then each participant selected the one she or he most preferred.

Picture Sorting

The picture sort begins with a stack of photographs, typically from magazines. For example, it might be a stack of pictures of women, men, or teens. The pictures depict different types of people doing a variety of things. The moderator asks the participants to sort through the pictures and pick out those that match certain characteristics. For example, “Look through these pictures, and pick out the people that would participate in community education.” “Here are some pictures of women. Sort the pictures into two categories. One category is women you think would breast-feed their child, and the second category is women who you think would bottle feed their child.” After the sorting exercise, the moderator asks participants to talk about what it was about the pictures that caused them to put them in certain categories. The images help us understand an issue in a different way than words.

Drawing a Picture

Each focus group participant is given a blank piece of 11×17–inch paper and colored pencils, markers, or their own box of crayons. Each participant is then asked to draw a picture that might offer insights on a behavior or attitudes. Use stick figures for those anxious about the difficulty of drawing people. A variation is to hand out a roughed-out sketch and ask participants to add words or narratives to the pictures.

After participants have drawn their pictures, they are asked to hold them up and describe. When the group is finished sharing, the moderator might ask the group what they saw in the different approaches. What is similar? What is different?

As with all these participatory exercises, the benefit is in the discussion following the picture drawing. The picture is merely the stimulus that helps participants collect their thoughts and explain how they see a concept or idea. However, the pictures can be incredibly helpful in sharing the focus group findings with others. We often include a few of these pictures in the final report.

Picture-drawing questions

Here are examples where participants are asked to draw pictures.

1. *The urban youth center participant*

“We want you to draw someone who uses the youth center. First draw a picture of the youth center, and make the front door large. Then draw a picture of this person standing at the door of the youth center after having spent the evening there. Draw the person. [Give participants some time.] This person has something in his or her hand. What is it? Draw something in his or her hand. [Give them some time.] OK, the person is saying something. Write down what the person is saying. [Give some time.] Now, over on the side of the paper, give the person a name, an age, and tell where they live. [Give some time.] Write down where they go to school and what they do in their spare time.”

2. *New moms' images of an ideal home visit from a public health nurse*

"Imagine an ideal home visit from a public health nurse. What would that be like? We want you to draw your ideal home visit. Draw yourself, your baby, and whoever else would be at this ideal home visit. Put a little arrow to the baby, and tell us how old the baby is when this ideal visit occurs. [Give some time.] The ideal nurse comes, and he or she brings a gift for you and a gift for the baby. What does the nurse bring? Draw the nurse, and draw what he or she brings for you and the baby. [Give some time.] The nurse has a name tag with the name of his or her organization on it. What organization is listed on the name tag in this ideal visit? Give the nurse a nametag, and list the organization. [Give some time.] The nurse does something while he or she is there that is really helpful. What does the nurse do? Draw it. [Give some time.] The nurse leaves you with a message that you really wanted or needed to hear. Draw a bubble from the nurse's mouth, and write down the message. [Give some time.] Finally in a corner, jot down three characteristics this ideal home visit has that are important to you."

3. *Moms who work outside the home*

"Draw a picture of yourself. You don't have to be an artist; a stick figure is just fine. Now draw an arrow to your mouth, an arrow to your head, and an arrow to your heart. When someone asks you, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what do you say—what comes out of your mouth? Write down what you say next to the arrow to your mouth. [Give some time.] When someone asks, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what do you think to yourself—what does your head say? Write that down next to the arrow going to your head. [Give some time.] When someone asks, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what does your heart say? Write that down next to the arrow to your heart. [Give some time.]"

We draw an example of the picture on a flip chart and have people copy the picture and fill in the blanks. We don't give examples of what they say, think, or feel because we don't want to lead or bias people. Ask people to share their drawings. Use the drawings as a basis for discussing the issues further.

Drawing a Diagram or Flow Chart

A variation of the picture drawing is asking participants to take a sheet of paper and show how something works. You might ask them to create a diagram that shows how something moves or changes over time. Some individuals are very familiar with flow diagrams, and others are not. You might offer simple directions that place the words *beginning* and *ending* at opposite ends of the page. Sometimes we place a time line at the bottom of the page. We ask participants to identify the steps, stages, or phases that help a person, group, or organization move from beginning to end. For example, employees in a large organization might be asked to depict the steps involved in the promotion process. Or a foundation might ask about the steps involved in obtaining a grant. Or former smokers might be asked to identify the steps they took to quit smoking. You might need to explain that you understand that people experience setbacks and that you are interested in those too. If they took three steps forward and two steps back, you are interested in all of their journey.

After individuals have prepared their diagrams, they are asked to hold them up and describe the steps they identified. When finished, the moderator might ask what steps were most often cited, what patterns group members see in the diagrams, what steps were particularly difficult or challenging, or other questions depending on the purpose of the study. Often the most valuable aspect of this exercise is in the discussion following the creation of the diagram.

Mind Mapping

A mind map is a visual depiction of how an individual thinks about a topic or issue. It can be done in a variety of ways, but one of the most popular is to give participants a blank sheet of paper and ask each person to write the topic in the middle of the page. For example, you might do a mind map of an organization, a familiar program, or product or a service that you wish to evaluate. They write the name in the middle of the page (e.g., “our organizational promotion policy”), and then they attach lines or nodes as thoughts come to mind around the topic.

When the maps are completed, participants are asked to describe them. Sometimes the moderator will ask each participant to indicate which node is most important, or most difficult, or most rewarding. The most productive part of the exercise is the discussion that follows the mind mapping. The moderator might begin by asking the group if they spotted any patterns or themes in the maps. Or, “What are the important things we need to remember about the topic?”

Using Your Imagination

Occasionally moderators will ask participants to imagine or dream about how things could be different. The challenge for the moderator is to establish the timing of the experience so that participants are ready for the exercise. For example, after participants have talked about the pros and cons of an alternative, the moderator might tell participants that there is a magic wand that makes their dream come true. The moderator passes around the wand, and as participants hold the wand, they share their dreams. Or, participants might be asked to close their eyes and imagine that they are on a special journey in a faraway land. Along the way they discover a special box that holds answers to great problems and difficulties that people have. When you open the box, you find the answer to the problem. What is in the box?

The moderator begins the experience by changing the pace of the group discussion. Up to this point participants were answering questions and conversing with others. Now, the moderator changes the mood of the conversation, perhaps by asking for a moment of silence, by using music to create a period of relaxation, or by guided imagery. This question often works well because it is different from what participants expect. The request seems unusual, unexpected, and sometimes even goofy. If you decide to use it, plan carefully for how you introduce the question.

Imagination questions

Here are three examples of questions that ask participants to use their imaginations.

1. *Planning an event*

A moderator was seeking creative suggestions for developing an educational event for food service workers. Designers had come up with the theme of having a carnival. She asked participants to close their eyes, listen to carnival music, and imagine themselves at the carnival. They were led through a guided imagery exercise and asked to jot down notes or try to remember what came to mind for each question. The group participants (who were helping design the carnival) were asked to do the following:

- Imagine promotional materials you have seen for the carnival that got you excited to go. How did they get your attention? What did they say? What did they look like?
- Imagine arriving at the carnival. What do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell?
- Imagine walking around the carnival and being excited about certain exhibits. What do the exhibits look like? What are they about? What are people doing?
- Imagine going back to work and telling coworkers that the event was great and incredibly useful. What made it great? What made it useful?

After the participants had been guided through the exercise, the moderator asked each question again and asked participants to share what they had imagined for each step.

2. *Solving problems*

An organization was exploring solutions to employees' child care problems. The moderator said, "Here is a magic wand. I'll pass it around the table, and when you receive it, give your magical solution to the problem. By waving the wand, your solution will come true. Take the wand, and tell us your solution."

3. *Planning*

Other studies have asked people to imagine ideal futures: "Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine that you have been cryogenically frozen and you wake up 20 years in the future. You are completely OK, and you awake to an ideal world. What is the university like in this ideal world?"

Developing a Campaign

Several youth focus group studies have used a campaign questioning strategy. The session begins with the moderator asking questions of the youth about campaigns. "What is a campaign?" "Tell us about where you've seen campaigns." "What happens in a campaign?" "What are the things that make up a campaign?" During this first part the young people typically talk about political campaigns and sometimes campaigns for schools, teams, or local causes. Campaigns have slogans, speakers, banners, songs, balloons, and celebrities. The moderator then asks the participants to develop a campaign that will get other young people to do something—perhaps eat more fruits and vegetables, get more exercise, or avoid drugs and alcohol. The campaign is aimed at other kids. Those in the focus group plan the strategy, complete with slogans, speakers, music, or whatever they think is needed to be effective. There is a supply of materials like markers and colored paper for the kids to use in developing their campaigns.

The group can be divided into two groups of three to five participants to work for 45 minutes to an hour and then reassemble. Kids then share their campaigns and talk about what they like best about each campaign.

This strategy works well with youth because it allows them to be active, to use their expertise, and to have fun. You can get creative with this. One researcher provided T-shirts and caps to the kids so they could identify themselves as their own marketing groups. The researcher gets ideas and learns which strategies the target audience finds to be effective. This campaign strategy also works with adults in promoting social issues, community activities, wellness campaigns, and a host of other efforts.

Doing Something Before the Focus Group

Sometimes focus group participants are asked to complete a task before coming to the focus group. The task helps the participant prepare for the group discussion. This task could consist of visiting a location, reviewing materials or a website, keeping a log of activities, taking photographs of the topic of interest, or trying an activity that provides experience with the research topic.

Photos in a scrapbook

A friend of ours was offered $100 to participate in a focus group, but she had to complete an assignment before attending. The sponsor sent her a scrapbook with labels attached. She had to look over the labels, take pictures that fit those titles, and put her photos in the scrapbook. It was a lot of work, but she agreed to do it.

The topic was automobile repair. The scrapbook pictures asked for photos of her car, who usually rode in her car, where she got fuel, where she got the car repaired, how she felt when the car was in the shop, among other things. The focus group was composed of all women, and it was an engaging discussion with each participant showing pictures and telling of their experiences. At the end the moderator thanked the women and kept the scrapbooks.

Keeping a log

In a study of mosquito control, focus group participants were asked to keep a 14-day log of their experiences with mosquitoes. The forms for the log were sent to participants in advance. Participants were paid to complete the log and attend the focus group. The logs helped participants recall their experiences in the previous two-week period, and the researchers collected the documents for later content analysis.

Listening to the Brain or the Heart

As you develop questions, consider whether you want to listen to the brain, the heart, or both. Traditionally, focus group interviews have sought insights from the brain—insights that are results of a logical, thoughtful process. More recently, researchers have been interested in the emotional factors that influence behavior. This change resulted from the discovery that many decisions in life are not made as a result of a rational process but instead emerge from emotions and feelings associated with the product or topic. And in some studies the goal is to obtain both brain and heart types of information.

When you ask participants what they think about the topic, you're asking for a rational answer—from their brains. These questions are often used when we are seeking an array of possibilities, such as discovery of the array of needs within a community. People respond in a more detached way. For example, if you ask, "What are the barriers that prevent people from participating in the weight loss program?" then you will tend to get intellectual answers. But, if you show a picture of an overweight person walking into a weight loss center, and ask, "Tell me about this person. How do they feel walking into this center?" you are more likely to get an answer that taps into feelings.

When listening to the heart, the focus group procedures change. The moderator asks for less-factual information and encourages discussion on feelings. The questions use projection, drawings, sorting, and a variety of action experiences to get participants more in touch with their feelings. Participants look at something, try something, or see a prototype, and then they discuss it. The moderator is looking for "emotional hot buttons" (Feig, 2006) related to the product or behavior.

We have found it helpful to include both thinking and feeling questions because together they provide better understanding. On some studies we favor the intellectual aspect, such as in needs assessments or in obtaining descriptions of how things work in the community. But in studies where participants need to take action, make a choice, purchase, enroll, or make a commitment, then we tend to favor the emotional factors.

Again, the argument is that we don't make decisions rationally; we make decisions based on emotions. Steven Reiss (2004), a professor of psychology, developed a taxonomy of motives that drive behaviors. Some focus group researchers try to identify which motives are related to the topic they are studying. If they find that people feel powerful when using a particular product, they may decide to develop an advertising campaign around power. This same idea is used in social marketing campaigns to sell ideas. Reiss's 16 motives are listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Steven Reiss's 16 Motives

Name	Motive
Power	Desire to influence (including leadership, related to mastery)
Curiosity	Desire for knowledge
Independence	Desire to be autonomous
Status	Desire for social standing (including desire for attention)
Social contact	Desire for peer companionship (desire to play)
Vengeance	Desire to get even (including desire to compete, to win)
Honor	Desire to obey a traditional moral code
Idealism	Desire to improve society (including altruism, justice)
Physical exercise	Desire to exercise muscles
Romance	Desire for sex (including courting)
Family	Desire to raise own children
Order	Desire to organize (including desire for ritual)
Eating	Desire to eat
Acceptance	Desire for approval
Tranquility	Desire to avoid anxiety, fear
Savings	Desire to collect, value of frugality

SOURCE: Reiss (2004), p. 187.

So if you want to discover the important factors that influence decisions, you might favor gathering insight on the emotions that influence those decisions. If on the other hand your purpose is merely to identify or categorize, then the logical and rational answers would be most helpful.

The Process We Use to Develop a Questioning Route

So how does one go about developing a questioning route for a focus group study? Here is a process that works well for us. Typically we do the following:

1. Brainstorm.
2. Sequence the questions.
3. Phrase the questions.
4. Estimate time for each question.
5. Get feedback from others.
6. Revise the questions.

7. Test the questions.

We've listed these as a series of steps, but the exact order you use depends on your circumstances. In addition we find that we regularly loop back to make revisions throughout the development process. Consider these steps:

Step 1. Brainstorm

We invite a few people who are familiar with the purpose of the study to meet to brainstorm questions. We have found it beneficial to include people with different experiences and backgrounds. Usually the team includes us, the client, and others whom the client invites. Often we plan for four to six people at a one- to two-hour meeting. We begin by reviewing the purpose of the study and types of participants to be invited. Then we ask people to take five minutes to write down questions that could be asked. Next we ask people to share their ideas, and then, we open it up to more brainstorming discussion. One person records all the ideas. People are allowed to comment on questions as they come up, but we try not to get stuck talking about one question. Sometimes the ideas for questions dry up quickly. Then we ask for ideas in different ways: What would you like to know after we are done? What kind of decision do you want to make? What kind of information would be helpful to you? At this point we are looking for key questions—those questions that will drive the study. We don't worry too much about the other kinds of questions. After an hour or two, we typically have plenty of questions to begin the next phase.

A group is great for generating ideas for questions, but a group isn't efficient for refining the questions. Therefore, we adjourn our brainstorming meeting, and then one or two people take responsibility for the next steps: working on the sequencing and phrasing the questions.

Step 2. Sequence the Questions

After brainstorming we begin to think about the question sequence. Focus group questions are not just thrown together. The researcher arranges the questions with care. This question sequence is the reason we use the word *focus* in the name. This focused sequence is sensible to participants. It provides an opportunity for participants to anchor their opinions and then build on those views. Here is how we sequence.

Key Questions First, Then Work Backwards

Begin by identifying your key questions. Likely you will have several, and you will need to place these key questions in a logical sequence. After you have established these key questions, you need to work backwards to develop the additional questions. Think about the question that might immediately precede your first key question. This is a question or topic that might naturally lead the conversation into the key questions. Then identify each of the earlier questions, so there is a natural and logical flow to the conversation. It is much more difficult to identify your questions from beginning to end. Starting at the end and working backwards is more efficient and results in better questions.

General Questions Before Specific Questions

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

The analogy of a funnel is helpful because it presents the researcher with a visual guide for arranging questions. The funneling concept is used to move the discussion from broad to narrow, from general to specific, or from abstract to specific. The funneling begins with fairly broad discussion and is followed by a series of narrower, more focused questions. Steadily the questions become more and more focused. Just how broad should the beginning questions be? Part of that depends on the number of questions you have and the amount of time scheduled for the focus group.

Moving from general to specific questions

This example of going from general to specific comes from focus groups conducted in Hawaii. To gain insights into how consumers use Kona coffee, the moderator began with questions about gourmet foods then asked about gourmet beverages. When a participant suggested Kona coffee, the moderator then encouraged discussion of how and when this type of coffee was used.

Positive Questions Before Negative Questions

If you want to ask a negative question, first ask the question phrased in a positive way. For example, if you want to ask, “What don’t you like about eating in the cafeteria?” first ask, “What do you like about eating in the cafeteria?" Give participants the chance to comment on both positive and negative experiences or observations. This strategy usually works better when the first request is for positive items. Perhaps it was our mothers' exhortation that we shouldn't say something bad unless we've first said something good.

The benefit of using both positive and negative questions is that it allows participants to comment on both sides of the issue—and in some situations, this is particularly important. At times focus group participants get in a rut and become excessively critical. It's reasonable for employees of an organization, students in an educational setting, or military personnel to launch into criticism of those who have control and power. In situations where participants begin with negative features and tend to dwell on the undesirable factors, there is value in turning the tables and asking for opposite views. "So what are the benefits of working around here?" "What's positive about being a student here?" "What could you do to make this neighborhood better?"

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

Uncued Questions Before Cued Questions

The rule of thumb is to ask the uncued question first and then follow up with cues to prompt additional discussion. For example, a moderator could ask as an uncued question, "What are the needs in this neighborhood?" After people discuss this question, the moderator could then use cues to elicit more comments. Perhaps the moderator might present a list on a flip chart that helps spur additional thoughts (like children, teenagers, young families, older families, the elderly, or safety, health, child care, jobs) and ask, "When you think of these categories, do any other needs come to mind?"

If the moderator does not offer cues and a certain topic is not mentioned (e.g., child care), then it is impossible to determine if it was an oversight or if it was just not important. The moderator can only determine the difference by offering cues. For example, if the researcher is particularly interested in needs of teenagers, but those needs don't come up in the discussion, the researcher has no way of knowing whether needs of teenagers aren't really important in that neighborhood or if they were just overlooked in the discussion. The researcher has to ask. The cues themselves require some thought. They are developed before the focus group. They are limited in number yet are also reasonably exhaustive.

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

Group Insights Before Expert Research, Then Group Reflection

You may want to get the reactions of focus group participants to the research of experts. Does the research seem credible? Is anything missed? Does this apply to your situation? But the danger is that expert research tends to intimidate some participants and also tends to limit the creative thinking of participants. A better strategy is to begin by asking the group for their insights. This might be done by making individual lists and then placing the results on a flip chart. The second step might be to look over the findings from previous research. Often we avoid calling it *expert research,* and instead we merely say, “Here are some things that others have said.” We invite participants to then look over both lists and offer their comments. They might identify the topic they are most concerned about, the items that we need to pay attention to, or perhaps list them in order of their importance.

Step 3. Phrase Questions

The researcher examines the list of questions and begins by identifying those questions that seem key to the study and editing them (phrasing them), so they will work in a focus group (e.g., take out jargon, make them open-ended). Then as the researcher adds questions, he or she begins to build the questioning route.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions allow the respondents to determine the direction of the response. The answer is not implied and the type or manner of response is not suggested. Individuals are encouraged to respond based on their specific situations. The major advantage of the open-ended question is that it reveals what is on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind. For example, consider these open-ended questions:

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

Some questions are deceptive and appear to be open-ended but are really closed-ended questions in disguise. Questions that include phrases like *how satisfied, to what extent,* or *how much* imply answers that fall within a specified range, such as *very satisfied, to a great extent,* or *a great deal*. Compare the question "How satisfied were you with the services you received?" to "How did you feel about the services you received?" The more open-ended question begs for more description, more explanation.

Closed-ended questions aren't totally off limits. They can provide very helpful information. You may want very simple information, like asking kids in a study of school lunch, "How many of you usually bring a bag lunch?" Or toward the end of the group interview, it may be productive to narrow the types of responses and bring greater focus to the answers by shifting to closed-ended questions. Also, bounding the questions may be helpful to a moderator trying to regain control of a rambling discussion or in situations where the topic requires more specific insights. For example, the moderator might ask, "Which of these three options do you like best?"

Selecting useful questions

Sometimes after a brainstorming session, you have many more questions than could actually fit in a questioning route. Where do you start? Which ones do you include? It helps to have mental screens for the questions like these:

- Is this a nice-to-know or a need-to-know question? Nice-to-know questions often arise from curiosity but aren’t crucial to the study. Need-to-know questions arise out of a need for information. We include need-to-know questions first.
- A variation of the preceding question is this: What would you do with this information if you had it? Is it going to help you move closer to your goal? We sometimes ask clients these questions to help us understand what would be useful to them. We start with questions that seem to have more potential to provide useful information.

Ask Participants to Think Back

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

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

Questions about future behaviors are often unreliable. Participants tend to answer as they wish the future would be, or as they would like to be seen, as opposed to the harsher reality of how it actually is.

The limit of think back questions

Think back questions should be limited to events or experiences that are fairly recent or particularly memorable. If the participants can't readily remember the experience, the question won't work.

Avoid Asking Why

The why question has sharpness to it that can remind one of interrogations. The respondent tends to feel confronted and defensive. Also, why questions imply a rational answer, but in real life, people make decisions based on impulse, habit, tradition, or other nonrational processes. When asked why, respondents feel like they should have a rational answer appropriate to the situation. The participant intellectualizes the answer and speaks from the brain and not from deeper forces that motivate behavior.

If the researcher decides to use a why question, it should be specific. Paul Lazarfeld (1986) has called this “the principle of specification.” Lazarfeld’s principle of specification is that why questions are answered in two ways. When asked why, the respondent may respond on (1) the basis of influences that prompted the action, or (2) the basis of certain desirable attributes. Why questions can be messy to analyze if participants aren’t clear whether you are asking for influences or attributes.

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

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

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

What seems like a straightforward and simple question can really be answered on several dimensions. The first answer describes an influence, and the second answer relates to a feature or attribute of the zoo. The preferred strategy is to break the why question down into different questions, for example:

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

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

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

Keep Questions Simple

Beginning researchers tend to make focus group questions too complex. Simple questions are essential. For example, don’t ask, “What are the ingredients that are associated with healthy living?” Instead say, “Describe a healthy lifestyle.” Think of the shortest way to clearly ask the question. The best focus group questions are simply stated. When these questions are asked, the participants immediately know what is asked for, and within seconds, they are on their way to providing an answer. By contrast, avoid questions that have multiple interpretations. The participant hesitates because the question is confusing.

Then, while thinking, he or she becomes distracted by the comments of other participants and forgets his or her train of thought.

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

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

Make complex questions visual

If you have a question that is difficult to put into few words, write it on a flip chart before the group begins, and flip to it when you get to that question in the discussion. The visual cue helps people understand and remember complex questions.

Make Questions Sound Conversational

Sometimes we get caught up in our own jargon or the language of our profession. This doesn't work well in focus groups. Insider language is offensive and doesn't communicate well to outsiders. We always try to ask questions in a way that sounds conversational. And we try to use language that is comfortable for the types of people we are asking. If we are talking with special education teachers, we may use more technical language than if we were talking with parents or students. If we are working with health care providers, we may use more technical language than if we are talking to patients or their family members. Sometimes we imagine, *OK, if I was in the backyard talking to the neighbors, how would I ask this?* We don't use acronyms unless they are well known or we explain them. Our goal is not to baffle participants with our vocabulary or puff up our egos but to seek to be enlightened by them.

Be Cautious About Giving Examples

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

Step 4. Estimate Time for Each Question

Another common error of beginning focus group researchers is to try to ask too many questions. We have seen questioning routes with 30 questions. In a two-hour group, that is less than four minutes per question—much too little time to expect in-depth discussion or useful information. Researchers tend to get superficial, top-of-the-mind information if they don't allow enough time for discussion.

Focus groups are typically two hours long. Successful groups have been conducted in less time, particularly with children or teenagers or on narrowly focused studies. We also occasionally hear of focus groups lasting more than two hours. The two-hour time limit, however, is a physical and psychological limit for most people. Don't go beyond two hours unless there is a special event or circumstance that makes it comfortable for participants, such as providing lunch or dinner.

Once we have a draft questioning route, we estimate how much time we should spend on each question, typically 5, 10, 15, or 20 minutes. When planning a two-hour group, we allow a little flexible time at the front end, about 15 minutes. If everyone is there on time, we start right away. But occasionally we will have to wait until enough people arrive to begin the group. We wait about 15 minutes and then begin with whoever is there. We also allow time at the end of the group for ending questions and summarizing (at least 15 minutes). This leaves about 90 minutes for the opening, introductory, transition, and key questions. We estimate how much time should be spent on each question, add up the time we have assigned the questions, and decide if we need to add or delete questions.

When estimating time for the questions consider:

- *The complexity of the question.* Some questions can be answered in a matter of seconds. For example, we occasionally ask very simple questions, like, “How many of you usually eat school lunch? Raise your hand if you usually eat school lunch.” Other questions demand more time and discussion, like “What do you think of the school cafeteria?”
- *The category of questions*. Opening and introductory questions typically don’t take much time. Allow the most time for key questions.
- *The level of participants’ expertise*. A group of experts will have more to say than a group of nonexperts on any topic, and you want to give them time to say it. One way to deal with this is to limit the number of questions to be asked of experts. For example, we may include 14 questions in a discussion with nonusers of a program but include only 10 questions in the questioning route for users of the program.
- *The size of the focus group*. A group of nine participants will usually discuss each question longer than will a group of six participants.
- *The level of discussion you want related to the question*. If you don’t want in-depth information about a particular question, allow less time for it. If you want in-depth data or insights, allow enough time for participants to wrestle with the question.
- *The amount of time required to complete an activity*. Questions that ask participants to draw, sort, or make a collage typically require more time.

Step 5. Get Feedback From Others

Once the questioning route is completed, it is time to send it back to the team that brainstormed the questions for their review. Usually it isn’t necessary to physically get back together to review the questions. E-mail works well for getting the draft questioning route back to people. Ask people to think about these questions:

- Are these the right questions? Will they get the type of information you need?
- Are these the words that people in the groups would use to talk about the issue?

- Do you understand the questions? Are any of them confusing to you?
- Do any of the questions seem redundant?
- Do the questions seem to flow from one topic to another?
- What have we missed?
- What can we delete?

Ask team members to get feedback to you by a certain date, usually within a week.

Step 6. Revise the Questions

Revise the questions, and repeat the feedback step. Send the revised draft to the team, and ask for their feedback. It is not unusual to run through several drafts before the team feels comfortable with the questions. If you get to a point where people start to nitpick, it is definitely time to test the questions.

Put the date on each draft to minimize confusion

With multiple revisions it is easy to get confused about which draft is the latest. Numbering the draft versions is helpful, but it also helps to date each draft.

Step 7. Test the Questions

We test questions before using the questions in a group. It is important to test them orally! Sometimes it is as simple as finding a few people who fit the focus group screen and asking them the questions. At this point we ask the questions as if we were conducting an individual interview. We pay attention to two things:

1. How easy is it to ask the question without reading it? Do the words flow smoothly, or do we stumble when we ask it? A question that seemed simple when we wrote it on the page may be awkward when we ask it aloud. If we stumble, we rephrase it to make it easier to say—more conversational.

2. Does the question seem confusing to the participants? Do they hesitate too long? Do they look confused? Do they give an answer that shows the question is confusing? Do they ask for clarification? If so, we ask them to tell us about what is confusing and ask for their help in making the question simpler.

After we have tested the questions with a few people, we hold the first focus group. We don't pilot-test the questions in the group. It is so time and labor intensive to set up a group that we want to be able to use the results from the discussion rather than consider it a pilot. If a question doesn't work in the first group, we revise it before the second group. At the end of the first group, we may ask the participants to help us revise a question that seemed awkward or confusing.

Changing Questions: The Importance of Consistency

Remember, if you wish to compare and contrast responses across groups, you must keep the questions consistent. If you change questions from group to group, you lose your ability to compare. The general rule is to maintain as much consistency as possible throughout the series of focus groups because it is in comparison and contrast that themes and patterns emerge from the data. Information obtained from a single focus group can yield interesting and helpful insights, but the researcher just doesn't know if similar findings would occur in another group. In analysis, the researcher strives for theoretical saturation that is only possible with consistency of questioning.

But what about studies where you have several different types of participants—groups of parents, students, teachers, and food service workers. Should you use the same questioning route for all groups? If you want to compare how teachers, students, and parents see or feel about a particular topic, you must have a core set of questions that remain consistent across groups. Often most of the key questions will stay the same, so you can compare and contrast how different types of participants answer the question. However, you may want to ask some questions that tap into the expertise or experience unique to a particular group. For example, in a study of how to increase kids' consumption of fruits and vegetables while at school, we asked the food service workers, "What makes it tough to serve fruits and vegetables at school?" This is an important question that highlights barriers for food service personnel, and they have unique expertise to answer this question. However, it wouldn't make sense to ask the other groups this question.

Circumstances When Questions Might Change

Occasionally it is wise to change or eliminate a question in a focus group interview; here are two circumstances when it should be considered.

1. Change the question if it clearly doesn't work. This is often spotted in one of the first focus groups. Here are three signals that a question doesn't work: (a) There is silence, and participants look baffled; (b) participants tell you that they don't understand the question; and (c) participants talk but aren't answering the question.

2. Change the question if saturation has clearly occurred, and the responses are of limited use. In many studies, theoretical saturation occurs somewhere between 3 and 12 focus groups. When conducting a sizable number of focus groups, such as more than 12, there is little to gain by continuing to ask questions of the same type of participants when the responses are predictable and of limited use. There is considerably more to gain by changing questions to build on what you have learned in the earlier groups. Based on what we have heard in the early groups, we may adapt a question to move it to another level.

Summary

There is no topic so important and yet so overlooked in focus group research as developing questions. Too often questions are hastily put together because they sound good to the researchers. Poor questions are confusing to participants and virtually impossible to analyze, and they waste precious resources. In this chapter we've highlighted the qualities that result in good questioning routes. These questions are conversational, clear, and short—among other things. Not all questions are alike, and five distinct types of questions were discussed: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions. We shared some questions that ask participants to go beyond the sit-and-talk response. Finally, we shared a process for developing questions.

Appendix 3.1

Example of Questions to Understand an Issue

These questions were used with supervisors of county employees to understand the issue of diversity in the workplace.

		Minutes
1.	Tell us your name and what area you supervise.	5
2.	What is your definition of diversity?	5
	Messages	
3.	What do you hear people saying about diversity a. over coffee breaks? b. at staff meetings or in publications?	5
4.	Who cares about diversity, and how do you know they care? Probe: Is diversity a priority of management? How can you tell?	10
	Retention	
5.	What makes diverse employees stay?	10
6.	What makes diverse employees leave?	10
	Barriers and Incentives	
7.	As supervisors, what incentives are there for you to create and maintain a diverse workforce?	10
8.	As supervisors, what makes it tough to create and maintain a diverse workforce?	10
	Resources	
9.	How comfortable are you with the amount you know about different races or cultures you might hire?	5
10.	Do you have resources for handling tense diversity issues? If so, where do you go?	5
	Improvements	
11.	What could be done to make the work environment more inviting for diverse employees?	15
12.	What could the county do to help make supervisors more effective in managing diversity?	15
	Closing Question	
13.	If you had one minute to give advice to (name of person), the director of diversity programs, about how to retain a diverse workforce in the county, what would you say?	5
	Total	110 min.

Appendix 3.2

Example of Questions for Pilot-Testing Materials

Here is an example of questions used to pilot-test materials designed to recruit veterans into a quit-smoking program.

		Minutes
	Materials Presented: Brochure #1 (handout) Brochure #2 (handout) Brochure #3 (handout)	
1.	Tell us your name and what town you live in.	5
	Brochure #1 (Hand each participant an envelope stuffed with the brochure and cover letter, just the way they might receive it in the mail.) Here is a package of materials that might be sent to veterans. Take about three minutes to look at the packet. Think about what you like and what you don't like about it. You can write on it. In a few minutes, I will ask for your reactions.	
2.	Now, what are your reactions to the package? What's your reaction to: a. The envelope (probe: size and color of envelope, return address, type of postage) b. The letter c. The brochure	10
3.	Here is a handout with two questions. Please answer each of these, and when you are done, you can pass them back to me. The first question is: a. If you got this in the mail, what would you do with the *letter*? Toss / Put aside for later / Read quickly / Read thoroughly / Read & call b. The second question is, what would you do with the *brochure*? Toss / Put aside for later / Read quickly / Read thoroughly / Read & call (Collect the answers. Tabulate on flip chart. Discuss. For those of you who said you would toss the letter, let's talk about that. What would prompt you to toss it?)	15

		Minutes
4.	What would make the letter better, so you would be more likely to read it and call?	10
5.	What would make the brochure better, so you would be more likely to read it and call?	10
	Brochure #2 Now we are going to look at another version of the brochure. [Hand out brochure #2]. Take a few minutes to look through this brochure. Again, think about what you like and don't like. You can write on it. In a few minutes, I will ask for your reactions.	
6.	What's your reaction to: The content How it looks	10
7.	What would make this better, so you would be more likely to read it and you would call?	5
	Brochure #3 We have one more version of the brochure for you to look at. [Hand out brochure #3]. Again, take a few minutes to look through it, and then we'll ask for your reactions.	
8.	What's your reaction to: a. The content b. How it looks	10
9.	What would make this better, so you would be more likely to read it and you would call?	5
10.	Which brochure do you like the most and why?	10
11.	What would it take to get you to sign up for this telephone coaching to help you quit smoking?	10
12.	What would keep you from signing up for this telephone coaching?	10
13.	The VA is trying to recruit veterans to participate in a telephone coaching system to help veterans quit smoking. Today we are trying to figure out what it will take to get veterans to sign up for the program. What have we missed?	5
	Total	115 min.

Appendix 3.3

Example of Questions for Evaluating Services

This was an evaluation of a county program that provided intensive support to families who had a child with complex needs. The focus groups were conducted with mothers of children who had received the services.

		Minutes
1.	Tell us your name and how you first learned about (name of program).	5
2.	What were your first impressions of (name of program)?	5
3	What was particularly helpful about (name of program)?	10
4.	What have you found to be particularly frustrating?	10
5.	What does your child like about (name of program)?	10
6.	What doesn't your child like about (name of program)?	10
7.	How does this compare with other mental health programs?	5
8.	Do you feel like you are an equal member of the team?	5
9.	What happens if you disagree?	5
10.	What would culturally appropriate services look like to you and your family? Do you think these services are culturally appropriate?	10
11.	Is your child any different because they received these services? If so, tell us how your child is different.	10
12.	Is your family any different because they received these services? If so, how?	10
13.	If you had a chance to give advice to the director of the program, what would you say?	10
14.	Would you recommend (name of program) services to other parents?	5
	Total	110 min.