

ASA Series

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# What Is a Survey?

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Section on Survey Research Methods  
American Statistical Association

ASA Series  
**What Is a Survey?**

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What Is a Survey?

How to Plan a Survey

How to Collect Survey Data

Judging the Quality of a Survey

How to Conduct Pretesting

What Are Focus Groups?

More About Mail Surveys

What Is a Margin of Error?

More About Nonresponse

*(in preparation)*

Designing a Questionnaire

*(in preparation)*

Surveys: Case Studies & Exercises

*(in preparation)*

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# What Are Focus Groups?

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## What Are Focus Groups?

**Q**ualitative data derived from focus groups are extremely valuable when vivid and rich descriptions are needed.

In fact, focus groups are an increasingly popular way to learn about opinions and attitudes. According to the late political consultant Lee Atwater, the conversations in focus groups "give you a sense of what makes people tick and a sense of what's going on with people's minds and lives that you simply can't get with survey data."

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*Focus groups are not polls but in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small number of carefully selected people.*

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Focus groups are not polls but in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small number of carefully selected people, brought together to discuss a host of topics ranging from pizza to safe sex.

Unlike the one-way flow of information in a one-on-one interview, focus groups generate data through the give and take of group discussion. Listening as people share and compare their different points of view provides a wealth of information — not just about what they think, but why they think the way they do.

This pamphlet, **What Are Focus Groups?** is the sixth in the ASA series *What Is a Survey?* It looks at an important companion to surveys — the focus group. Broad coverage is given to how and when focus groups are used, what their results mean, and their advantages and disadvantages.

The *What is a Survey?* series is written primarily for the general public. Its overall goal is to improve survey literacy among individuals who participate in surveys or use survey results. The series is designed to promote a better understanding of what is involved in carrying out sample surveys — especially those aspects that have to be taken into account in evaluating the data and results of surveys.

## Who Uses Focus Groups?

- **Political pollsters** use focus groups to ask potential voters about their views of political candidates or issues.
- **Organizational researchers** use focus groups to learn how employees and managers feel about the issues confronting them in the workplace.
- **Marketing firms** use focus groups to determine how customers respond to new products.
- **Public agencies** find focus groups an important tool in improving customer service.
- **Survey designers** use focus groups to pretest their ideas and to interpret the quantitative information obtained from interviewing.

## How Are People in Focus Groups Selected?

Unlike surveys in which a representative sample of the population is selected to study,

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**The composition of a focus group is usually based on the homogeneity or similarity of the group members.**

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a planned sample is chosen for focus groups.

The composition of a focus group is usually based on the homogeneity or similarity of the group members. Bringing people with common interests or experiences together

makes it easier for them to carry on a productive discussion.

Often a research project will use different groups to get differing views. *For example*, an organization is planning a major restructuring. It would be desirable to have three separate focus groups — union members, nonunion employees, and managers. Each of these groups would represent a potentially different

perspective on the changes facing the organization. Imagine the potential problems in bringing together union members and management. Neither would feel free to speak spontaneously and,

depending on the anxiety level, the discussion might possibly spiral out of control.

Demographic characteristics are another way to determine focus group composition:

- A political candidate might consider holding separate focus groups with both men and women or younger and older voters.
- A company testing a new product might conduct focus groups in different geographical regions.
- Organizational decisionmakers might find it useful to have separate focus groups for those who favor and those who oppose a particular issue.

**One caution**—remember that with a focus group, it is not possible to compare the results from different groups in a strict quantitative sense, because they lack representativeness. Each group may be characterized as augmenting the information of the others — in an effort to look for as many different explanations or interpretations as possible.

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***One caution — with a focus group it is not possible to compare the results from different groups in a strict quantitative sense . . .***

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***Demographic characteristics are another way to determine focus group composition.***

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## Who Conducts Focus Groups?

Generally, focus groups are conducted by trained “moderators,” who are skilled in maintaining good group dynamics. Depending on the purpose of the focus group, the moderator may also be an expert in a given topic area. The moderator’s basic job is to keep the group “focused.” He or she has the goal of helping the group generate a lively and pro-

ductive discussion of the topic at hand.

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***The moderator’s job is to keep the group “focused” and to generate a lively and productive discussion.***

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It is imperative that a moderator understand the underlying objectives of the study.

Much of the data quality in focus groups depends on how effectively the moderator asks the questions and how

well this person keeps the discussion targeted on the research objectives. Making this work requires the ability to tailor one’s moderating style to different types of groups. Going back to the previous example, there may need to be differences in both the questions and the approach to moderating for the three groups of union members, nonunion members, and managers.

## What Types of Questions Should Be Asked in a Focus Group?

Questions should be open-ended so that there are many possible replies. Short-answer questions, such as those that can be answered “Yes” or “No,” should be avoided. It is also important to avoid leading questions that suggest the moderator’s opinion or the answer that he or she hopes to receive. Questions also should be



- clearly formulated and easily understood
- neutral so that the formulation does not influence the answer
- carefully sequenced with easier, general questions preceding more difficult ones
- ordered so that less intimate topics precede the more personal questions.

Focus-group questions are not a form of group interviewing (*i.e., scooping up 10 interviews at one time*).

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***Questions should be “open-ended.” Those that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” should be avoided.***

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“**Serial Interviewing**” is not being done either — in which the moderator asks a question and just passes from person to person getting an answer. Ideally, the moderator places the question (or issue or topic) before the

group. They then discuss it among themselves — talking to each other, asking each other questions about what they hear, and generally reacting to each other. It is a totally different dynamic from an interview.



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### What Is the Ideal Size of a Focus Group?

The ideal size for a focus group is generally between 6 and 12 people. This size group encourages participants to contribute their ideas.

Too-small groups are easily dominated by one or two members, or they may fall flat if too few people have anything to contribute. (Another problem is that the session may lapse

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*The ideal size for a focus group is between 6 and 12 people.*

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into serial interviewing and lack energy.)

Too large a group lacks cohesion and may break up into side conversations, or people may become frustrated if they have to wait their turn to respond or to get involved.

If people are brought together because they have common experiences to discuss, you run the risk of not getting much new

information when there too few people in the group. You bring numerous people together in the hope that they will bounce ideas off each other so that a "bigger, more expansive" answer or explanation emerges. However, there is a point of diminishing returns where too many participants add nothing new.

### What Is a Typical Focus Group Like?

Prior to the focus group, participants are usually recruited by telephone. Care needs to be taken to ensure that people who know each other are not recruited into the same sessions. People are generally more open and less guarded with people they don't know and don't have to worry about ever seeing again. Absolutely never put people together who are in some chain of command (e.g., supervisors with employees, teachers with students, etc.).

When being recruited, potential participants receive a brief description of what the group will be about, as well as assurances that

**Participation in a focus group is voluntary and confidential.**

their participation is entirely voluntary and that their confidentiality will be protected. Focus-group participants are often paid \$25 to \$50 for reimbursement of their time

and travel expenses. In addition, a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere is often created by providing light refreshments or even a meal.

At the focus group itself, the moderator begins with an introduction that should include the following

- explaining the purposes of the focus group
- laying down some basic ground rules to encourage everyone to participate in the discussion
- reassuring the participants about the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation
- introducing the moderator and any comoderators and explaining how and why these group members were invited to participate (*e.g., what they may have in common*)
- stating the purpose of notetaking and recording.

The moderator typically begins the discussion with an ice-breaker giving participants the chance to introduce themselves to the group. Once introductions are complete, the moderator guides the discussion, using an outline of questions, to explore various aspects of the

**The moderator guides the discussion, using an outline of questions to explore various aspects of the research topic.**

research topic. As the group responds to each question, the moderator can probe for more information and ask follow-up questions to elicit more discussion.

Focus-group sessions are frequently scheduled to last two hours, with the discussion taking 90 minutes. Once all of the questions have been asked, the moderator may conclude by giving a summary of the major points in the discussion and asking the group for feedback.

Or, the moderator may have each participant think back over what was discussed and then have each one choose what he or she felt was the most important point. Another good way of concluding is to ask participants if there are any questions about a particular topic that were not asked but should have been.

**How Do You Keep Track of What Is Said During a Focus Group?**

The most popular techniques for capturing data from focus groups includes the following

- **Video recording:** This technique captures both verbal and nonverbal information. One drawback is that it can be intrusive and can inhibit some participants.
- **Audio recording:** With this method you can obtain verbal information verbatim. A possible disadvantage is that nonverbal information and observational data are lost.
- **Manual notetaking:** This procedure involves hand writing the discussion verbatim. It is not recommended, however, given the speed limitations of writing by hand. With this method, you run the risk of severely altering the analysis by selectively recording things that were said loudly or repeatedly and missing the more subtle information that emerged from the discussion.
- **Multiple methods of recording:** Notetaking, in conjunction with audio or video recording,

definitely can be worthwhile. To take notes there should be a co-moderator, either in the room or — better — behind one-way glass. There is no way on earth a single moderator can follow the discussion and take notes. It is just not physically possible, considering all the other jobs moderators have to do.

### How Do Focus Groups Compare to Surveys?

There are advantages and disadvantages to using any technique. Focus groups are no different in this respect.

The method of choice is constrained by your budget, your time, and availability of resources.

Focus groups and surveys have very different strengths. Focus groups excel at providing in-depth qualitative insights gleaned from a relatively small number of people. Surveys provide quantitative data that can be generalized to larger populations. Surveys measure things — frequencies of behavior, differences in attitudes, intensity of feelings, and so forth. Focus groups do not measure. They collect a breadth or range of information so that a “story” can be told.

The best information can often be gathered by using the focus groups and surveys together. Surveys can provide precise quantitative information; focus groups can provide qualitative data that penetrates more deeply.

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*While surveys provide quantitative information, focus groups can provide qualitative data that penetrates more deeply.*

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### Advantages of Focus Groups

Among the advantages of focus groups are the following

- A wide range of information can be gathered in a relatively short time span.
- The moderator can explore related but unanticipated topics as they arise in the discussion.
- Focus groups do not require complex sampling techniques.

### Disadvantages of Focus Groups

There is also a set of accompanying disadvantages:

- The sample is neither randomly selected nor representative of a target population, so the results cannot be generalized or treated statistically.
- The quality of the data is influenced by the skills and motivation of the moderator.
- Focus groups lend themselves to a different kind of analysis than would be carried out with survey results. In surveys, the emphasis is on counting and measuring versus coding/classifying/sorting, in a focus group.

A focus-group analysis is truly qualitative. You use the actual words and behaviors of the participants to answer your questions, rather than counting response options.

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*Focus group analysis allows researchers to use the actual words and behaviors of the participants rather than counting response options.*

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## Where Can I Get More Information?

In addition to the pamphlets in this series, ASA also makes other brochures available upon request:

- ***Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice***

- ***Surveys and Privacy***, produced by the ASA Committee on Privacy and Confidentiality

For the above brochures or other pamphlets in the *What Is a Survey?* series, contact:

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E-mail: [asainfo@amstat.org](mailto:asainfo@amstat.org)

or see the Section's web site at

<http://www.stat.ncsu.edu/info/srms/html>

Besides the ASA, there are many other associations that are concerned with the proper collection and use of survey data—

- **The American Association for Public**

**Opinion Research** (AAPOR) offers a number of publications—perhaps the most relevant of these is the one entitled *Best Practices for Survey and Public Opinion Research Survey Practices AAPOR Condemns*. To obtain copies, call (313) 764-1555 or E-mail their web site at <http://www.aapor@umich.edu>.

- **The National Council on Public Polls**

publishes another useful pamphlet, *Twenty Questions a Journalist Should Ask About Poll Results*. To obtain a copy, call (800) 239-0909.

- **The Research Industry Coalition, Inc.**,

publishes a brochure, *Integrity and Good Practice in Marketing and Opinion Research*. To obtain a copy, call (516) 928-6803.

- **The Council of American Survey Research**

**Organizations** publishes a pamphlet, *Surveys and You*. To obtain a copy, call (516) 928-6954, or E-mail their web site at <http://www.casro.org>.

This pamphlet was drafted initially by survey sampling students at the George Washington University. Professor David Morgan and Linda Stinson, among others, helped carry it through to completion.

For suggestions about this pamphlet or potential future topics in the *What Is a Survey?* series, contact Fritz Scheuren, overall series editor and coordinator, at Ernst and Young, Washington, D.C. at [fritz.scheuren@ey.com](mailto:fritz.scheuren@ey.com).

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