

# How to...



## Use focus groups

Get the most from them

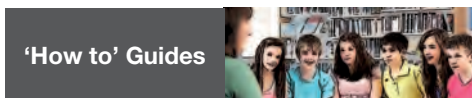
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## What do focus groups involve?

Focus groups involve five main steps: developing the questions you want to ask; identifying the sample (your participants); conducting the group; drawing together and analysing the data; and reporting the findings.

As early as possible in this process, you should decide how you will ensure your project is ethical. (See [www.nfer.ac.uk/ris](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/ris) for further information on ethics).

Figure 1 sets out the five steps in planning and implementing focus groups.

## Steps in conducting focus groups

Looking at each of the main steps in turn, we outline the key activities you will need to carry out. We also include some aspects for you to consider at each step.

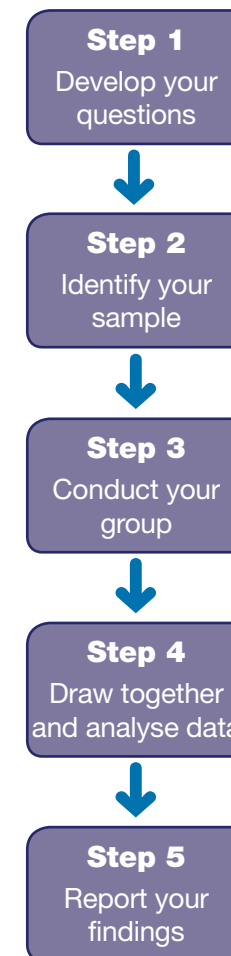


## Step 1: Develop your questions

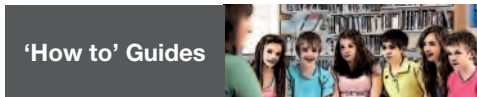
### The questions should:

- be preceded by a short introduction which outlines who you are, the purpose of the focus group, and how the data will be used (e.g. to inform a new policy or improve practice)
- start off with an ‘ice-breaker’, e.g. ‘tell us one thing about your school which you enjoy’, or, ‘please introduce yourself, telling us what school you are from and what year group you teach’
- be more general at first, and then become more specific, ending in a ‘review’ question which summarises the main points discussed (e.g. ‘what are the most important points we have discussed today?’, or ‘what have you found out about [the topic] today?’)
- be clear, concise and logically ordered.
- be no more than five to 10 in number for a focus group lasting one to one and a half hours. Within a school setting, you are unlikely to want to carry out focus groups with children and young people for longer than one hour.
- elicit a detailed response and not one word answers. You should ask ‘open’ questions (e.g. what, how, why and where questions) rather than ‘closed’ questions which will gain a short, ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Possible examples are: ‘What do you like about the gardening club?’ rather than ‘Do you like the gardening club?’.

Figure 1







## Step 3: Conducting your group

### Considerations:

#### Managing your focus group:

- You will need an impartial and experienced person (known as the ‘moderator’) to lead the group. The moderator should explain the purpose of the group, ask the questions, keep the participants on track and on time, invite all participants to contribute and summarise the discussion at key points.
- Ideally, the moderator should be supported by someone else (the ‘assistant’). The assistant helps the group to run smoothly by welcoming participants, taking notes (including noting down who is speaking), offering refreshments, helping with time keeping, and supporting the moderator.
- As people become more experienced at running focus groups, it is possible to moderate alone. In these circumstances, it is advisable to audio record the discussion (only with all participants’ permission).

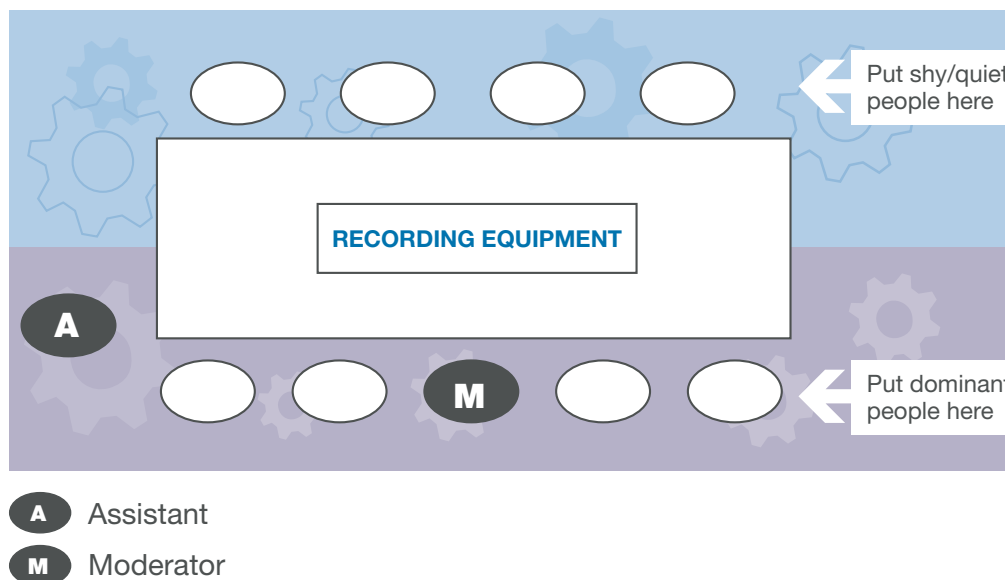
#### The venue and participants:

- The venue should be neutral, convenient for participants and comfortable. *Before* participants arrive make seating arrangements accordingly, as shown in Figure 2.
- Try to make participants feel at ease. Welcome them

upon arrival and provide refreshments where possible. Use this time to chat informally and use this interaction to check whether they are likely to be shy or dominant.

- Make name cards or name badges for each participant. Ask them to write their name on them and place them on the desk in front of them. This will not only help the moderator but also the other participants, especially if they do not know one another.

**Figure 2: Focus group seating plan**







## Resource considerations

**While focus groups enable researchers to collect information from a range of people in one sitting, there are some resource implications. These include:**

- The time it can take to identify possible participants and to contact (and re-contact) them.
- The time it can take to type up your focus group notes (this can take up to ten times as long as the focus group meeting for a full transcription, although it is usually less).
- You need to consider whether you will have a moderator and assistant for each focus group. Bear in mind that if you do not have an assistant, and your participants do not want you to record your focus group, the quality of your notes are likely to be of poorer quality.
- The equipment you will need includes a quiet room of suitable size, chairs and possibly a table, audio recording equipment and refreshments (optional).

## Sharing your research

**You could share your research in the following ways:**

- giving presentations to pupils, teachers, governors and parents
- writing an article for the school newsletter and/or colleagues in other schools

- writing for a practitioner journal or trade press
- send your report to your focus group participants (it is good practice to do so)
- writing an entry for an online publication, e.g. a blog or website.

Further information is available from NFER's 'How to' guides at [www.nfer.ac.uk/ris](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/ris).

## Research ideas

**Here are some ideas for how you could use focus groups in the school setting.**

- Generating ideas for how the school can become more eco-friendly in future.
- Gathering governor, staff, parent/carer and/or learner opinions on how well a new policy (e.g. admissions, inclusion) is working.
- Getting feedback on what the community wants from a new school e.g. buildings; outreach; courses; leisure facilities; access to wider support services.
- Identifying what issues affect the transition from primary to secondary school and how the school (and its feeder schools) can address them.
- Generating solutions to promote communication between the school and home environments.

- Exploring the accessibility of new classroom materials for learners with special educational needs (SEN) and additional learning needs (ALN).

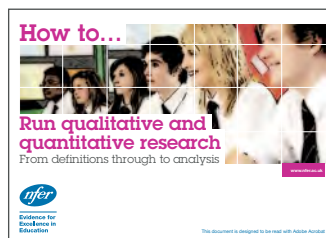
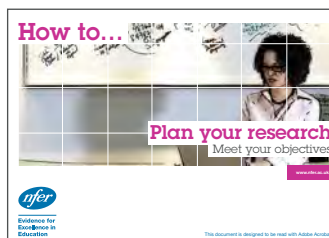
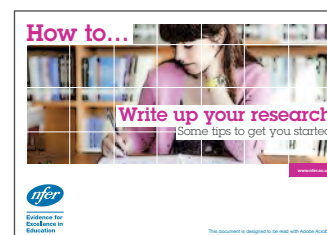
## Other useful resources

We hope that this short guide to using focus groups has whetted your appetite for carrying out your own research. NFER has published a series of 'How to' guides for practitioners who want to carry out their own research, helping you put your ideas into practice. NFER have research books and training days available as well as free guidance on topics to research and methods of research. Why not get recognition for your achievements in research in your school, college or early years setting by applying for the NFER Research Mark? Visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/ris](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/ris) for more information.

# Use focus groups – get the most from them

The NFER 'How to' guides are a quick and easy way to digest different aspects of research.

Written by NFER researchers, these guides will help practitioners run research projects in education. From definitions and benefits, through to potential pitfalls, they will ensure the research is based on professional guidance.



## 'How to' Guides



The material in this guide has been re-purposed from Sharp, C. (2011). 'Using focus groups.' In: Lawson, A. (Ed) *Research Tool-kit: the How-to-Guide from practical research for education* (Volume 2). Slough: NFER.

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