

TIP SHEET: FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Designing Focus Group and Interview Questions for Maximum Impact

This content is adapted from Washburn, K & Carpinento, J (2013). Using qualitative methods to evaluate school-based youth programs. Presented at the Third Annual Teen Pregnancy Prevention Grantee Conference, May 20-22, National Harbor, MD. Retrieved from http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/Assests/qualitativemethods_evaluate_schools.pdf

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Whether you are conducting an interview (structured, unstructured, or semi-structured) or a focus group, questions should be clear and concise, singular, and *truly* open-ended.

➤ AVOID DICHOTOMOUS QUESTIONS

Dichotomous questions are questions that have only two possible responses. Usually, dichotomous questions are yes or no questions (“Did you like this program?”). Dichotomous questions are conversation-enders, and are better suited to surveys than to interviews. A better way to ask the question above might be “Thinking back on your experiences, what are some things you liked about this program?”

➤ AVOID OTHER “CLOSED” QUESTIONS

A question does not need to be dichotomous to be closed-ended. Any question that elicits a one word response (i.e. “fine” or “good”) can be less than ideal in an interview situation. Instead of “How was school today?” try “Tell me about the best part of school today.” If you do use dichotomous or closed-ended questions, plan to follow up with a more open-ended question. For example, “Did you enjoy this activity?” followed by “What are some things you enjoyed about it?”

PRACTICE: Try to improve upon the questions in the left-hand column so that they are more open-ended.

Did you enjoy the activity you did today?	
How was the field trip?	
How long have you been involved in this program?	

ASK CLEAR AND SINGULAR QUESTIONS

Questions should be as simple and straightforward as possible. Avoid overly complex sentences, jargon, acronyms, and technical terms. If possible, it is a good idea to pilot test your questions with people who are similar to those you intend to interview.

- **USE THE LANGUAGE YOUR INTERVIEWEES MIGHT USE**
 Think about your target audience when developing questions, taking care to use words they would use and/or understand. Instead of asking “What role does your mentor play in helping your manage anxiety?” try “What are some things your mentor could do to help you handle stress?”
- **AVOID DOUBLE-BARRELED QUESTIONS**
 Ask only one question at a time. If you ask a question with multiple parts, respondents may become confused and choose only one part to answer. An example of a double-barreled question is “How does the staff of this program make you feel welcome and include you in decision making?” It would be better in this case to ask two separate questions.

PRACTICE: Try to improve upon the questions in the left-hand column so that they are clearer and/or more singular.	
What was the best part of today’s activity and what could be improved?	
Was your group leader knowledgeable and respectful?	
How has this program improved your ability to regulate your emotions?	

OTHER TIPS (AND TRAPS)

In addition to the guidelines above, here are a few other things to keep in mind as you create an interview or focus group guide:

- **AVOID “WHY” QUESTIONS**
 These questions can feel somewhat confrontational, and can subtly imply that there is correct or logical answer to the question being asked. Try to rephrase why questions – instead of “Why did you join this program?” try “What was is about this program that made you join?”
- **THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT DIFFICULT OR SENSITIVE QUESTIONS**
 Difficult or sensitive questions are best avoided in group situations. In one-on-one interview situations, these questions may be asked, but with caution. Start out with simpler questions, and move on to more challenging ones later, after you have established rapport.
- **LOOK OUT FOR BIAS**
 In order to get the most useful information from an interview or focus group, keep your questions as neutral as possible. Leading (or biased) questions are phrased in such a way that they encourage a particular response. These should be avoided. An example of a biased question is “How has your community service helped you to be more empathetic?” A better question might be, “Can you describe some effects that your community service has had on you?”