



Documenting and Summarizing a Focus Group: The Role of the Scribe

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Overview

Results of the focus groups will inform thinking about what is driving audiences to return to performing arts venues and the kind of information the need to support that decision. A protocol document was developed for each focus group topic, and as the interview script will also serve as your outline for documenting and reporting results. The Moderator and the Scribe are a team, working together, to reveal and document the most useful information regarding the topic at hand.

Role of the Scribe

The Scribes job is to capture the key themes of the conversation with some verbatim quotes that illustrate each theme. It is recommended that the Scribe listens to the live focus group (if possible) with their video and audio off. If the Scribe is not available to take part in the live session, the summary notes can be compiled afterwards. Also, recordings can be referred to for clarity when compiling your final notes.

Some hints on summarizing themes:

- Create your outline from the interview protocol ahead of time with headers for each key topic.
- As you can refer back to the recording, don't worry about capturing the complete verbatim quotes live.
- If respondents say something emphatically or repeatedly, underline the comment or idea in your notes, to suggest emphasis rather than repeating it in your notes.
- Circle themes or ideas that YOU think are important as you go along.
- Don't worry about spelling mistakes; getting the themes down is more important

During the focus group, note the time of any particularly interesting or representative comments that you may wish to return to and capture verbatim. In your report use quotation marks to delineate verbatim comments such as:

"They assured me that all audience members would be wearing facial coverings."

The role of the Scribe is essential. The Scribe provides a summary of the one-hour discussions so that the results can be quickly, accurately, and easily shared with others in their organization and in the cohort.

Analyzing and Summarizing the Data

Fundamentally, the process of analyzing qualitative data is one of pattern recognition. Scholars agree on a basic sequence of analytical work:

1. Organize the data. Use your protocol questions as your outline and collate or format your data by question or topic, so as to make it easy to ascertain patterns.
2. Find and organization the ideas and concepts in your notes. Listen for repeated words, phrases, and ideas. How consistent or inconsistent are the responses to a give question? In reporting qualitative data, it is important to accurately characterize the range of responses to a given question, so as not to misrepresent the results.
3. Build over-arching themes from your notes. As you review your notes, look for commonalities that would indicate a theme. This is synthesis work. Can different statements to a question be collapsed into an over-arching theme (e.g. mask wearing must be mandated)? Be careful to accurately characterize the strength of a theme (e.g. major or minor), bearing in mind that multiple themes, or even opposing themes, can emerge from the analysis of comments to the same question.
4. Ensure reliability and validity in the data analysis and the findings. As your themes emerge, look for disconfirming data (i.e., negative instances of the pattern) that would temper your reporting on that theme. Look to other question data to see if it refutes or corroborates your themes and key observations. Finally, acknowledge any factors or biases that may be at play in your data.
5. Find possible and plausible explanations of your findings. At this stage, you attempt to explain your findings and make informed assertions about the implications of a given theme on your organization's policies or operations. Were there any surprises? As your colleagues for help in interpreting your findings, as colleagues with differing perspectives may bring helpful meaning to research results.

Know the Limitations of Qualitative Data

In reading a research report based on qualitative data, or when designing your own qualitative exploration, it is absolutely essential to understand the limitations of the data in order to avoid drawing false conclusions.



It is the researcher's ethical obligation to disclose sources of bias and other limitations in the data.

Focus group discussions are useful in defining issues that might otherwise remain vague, in evaluating perceptions and motivation, and in generating other qualitative feedback that can have a direct impact on operations and communications. Caution and judgment should be used in evaluating qualitative research findings, however. In most cases, the participants in focus groups represent a very small sample of the target population being studied.

In focus group discussions, group dynamics can have an impact on responses. Some respondents are reluctant to disagree with their peers, while others may provide answers that they think are desired by the moderator – a phenomenon called “acquiescent response.” Good moderators can minimize these and other biases in designing and moderating focus groups, or by conducting multiple focus groups, but some amount of bias is present, inevitably, in the data.

In interpreting qualitative data, therefore, always be aware that the findings most likely cannot be statistically projected or generalized to the larger population being studied. The natural tendency to want to “conclude” things from qualitative research should be counterbalanced with a healthy amount of skepticism.

After the Focus Group

Allow yourself at least 15 minutes of time after your focus group to debrief with your partner (the moderator). Use this time to talk through the session and identify the few most salient aspects of the conversation together. Move question by question through the protocol and your notes and briefly discuss your impressions of the participants' answers and distill some key observations. What surprised you? How did this information compare with your results from surveying? *This debriefing is an essential component of the process. Without it, you're likely to lose a great deal of the data.*

Both Moderators and Scribes should be prepared to summarize your focus groups at an AOM cohort meeting facilitated by WolfBrown.

