

# Queen's REB Guidelines and Facilitator Guide for Focus Group/Semi-Structured Interviews

# Queen's REB Guidelines and Facilitator Guide for Focus group and Semi-Structured interviews

**Version 2.0**

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Inquiries and permission requests for commercial use may be directed to:

Queen's University  
Vice-Principal Research  
Research, Compliance, Training, and Ethics  
355 King Street West  
Kingston, Ontario  
K7L 2X3  
[chair.greb@queensu.ca](mailto:chair.greb@queensu.ca), [hsreb@queensu.ca](mailto:hsreb@queensu.ca)  
[Research Compliance, Training and Ethics](#)

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## Purpose

The purpose of this guideline and facilitator guide is to:

- Provide clear guidance on designing focus group/semi-structured interview sessions for research studies.
- Promote and facilitate best practices in conducting focus group/semi-structured interview sessions for research studies.
- Prompt your creation of the focus group/semi-structured interview script (i.e., the script you will submit to the REB for approval prior to conducting your focus group/semi-structured interview session).
- Provide guidance to the facilitator (PI/study team) to assist with steps for actively conducting a focus group/semi-structured interview discussion session.

## Background

A focus group/semi-structured interview is a data collection procedure that brings together people to answer questions facilitated by a PI/study team. A focus group session involves a group of people who collectively answer questions or discuss topic in the presence of one another. A semi-structured group interview could also occur collectively as a group (this is the equivalent of a focus group). A semi-structured interview could be done on a 1:1 basis between the participant and the PI/study team. Participants are chosen based on predefined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest.

## A focus group/semi-structured interview session in perspective

### Why a focus group/semi-structured group interview?

Focus group/semi-structured group interviews are valuable tools to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in a relaxed, non-judgemental environment that fosters the expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus. Group dialogue can generate rich information, as participants' insights tend to "trigger" the sharing of others' personal experiences and perspectives in a way that can more easily tease out the nuances of complex topics and subjects. This dynamic is not present during semi-structured 1:1 interviews. Focus group/semi-structured group interviews also provide a representation of diverse opinions and ideas and are a low cost and efficient way to generate information.

### Why a 1:1 semi-structured interview?

1:1 semi-structured interviews are valuable to obtain ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in a limited (i.e. not in front of a group of people) setting that will allow points of view to be expressed. Participants may speak more freely in a 1:1 semi-structured interview, because they will feel more comfortable voicing opinions without the presence of a group.

## Timing

Focus group/semi-structured interviews normally last about an hour and a half, though they may be longer in some cases.

## Number of participants

Focus group/semi-structured group interviews normally have between 7 and 10 participants. Groups with fewer than 7 participants often result in a limited range of ideas and opinions being represented. Groups larger than 10 may be hard to manage and record.

## Preparatory work

### Prepare the focus group/semi-structured interview script

The focus group/semi-structured interview script is an outline, prepared in advance for a specific set of participants, that covers the topics and issues to be explored.

Important note: The document **Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template** must be submitted to the REB and receive approval before implementation and use.

### Select the team

Establish a facilitator to guide the discussion, and, if applicable, a note taker who will make hand-written notes and observations during the discussion. The note taker must be a study team member.

### Recruitment

Recruitment consists of 2 phases. The first phase consists of 2 stages:

1. Identification of potential participants, stage 1 (done by the researcher/study team).
2. Initial point of contact (IPC) contacts potential participants. NOTE: the IPC may be a person OR may be a tool such as a poster or flyer.

The second phase consist of 1 stage:

1. Informed consent (done by the researcher/study team).

Once a potential participant has been identified as a possible research study participant, the IPC then must approach this individual to ask if the potential research participant would like to hear more about a research study that they are possibly eligible for. Potential participants are targeted for potential enrollment based on study eligibility criteria.

When setting selection criteria for focus group/semi-structured interviews, be sure that participants fit the criteria established for inclusion in a particular focus group/semi-structured interview. It is also important to ensure that focus group/semi-structured interview participants represent the diversity of the larger group about whom you want to learn.

## **Time and location**

Set a date: Plan a day and time that is convenient for the participants. Before the date of the focus group/semi-structured interview, invite appropriate participants to take part. It is helpful to send reminders 1 day before the session takes place.

Reserve a space: It is up to you to use your best judgement and decide on the most appropriate location. Select a location that is comfortable, quiet, and has some degree of privacy. It may be necessary, depending on the participants, to have the group meet in a public space such as a church or community center. Arrange for food and drink, if appropriate.

## **Additional considerations for conducting focus group/semi-structured interview sessions**

Be mindful of the following items when designing methodologies for the use of focus group/semi-structured interview sessions for the purpose of a research study.

### **Building rapport**

Establish a connection with participants that will facilitate communication.

Rapport is essential to the facilitation process since it can influence the willingness of participants to communicate and answer questions. Let participants know that they are there because they possess knowledge and experience about topics that you hope to learn more about and will contribute to your research; this will communicate to participants that their input is important and will contribute to the community. Become familiar with critical issues that affect the community represented by participants. You are there to learn from them but must be aware of sensitive topics, so you do not unintentionally insult participants.

Finally, recognize participants for their contribution. This is crucial in creating rapport. Thank participants for their time and contributions and let them know the information they shared is valuable for your research.

### **Listening skills**

Active listening is the practice of listening to understand what someone is saying, exclusively focusing on what is being said instead of planning what you will say next. Notice body posture and facial expressions that might provide cues to help engage participants properly.

Let the participants know you are paying attention to what they are saying by exhibiting positive nonverbal communication like eye contact, leaning in, and nodding when appropriate. Avoid distractions, like your phone or your watch, as this will make participants feel that you are disinterested and might hamper their participation in the focus group/semi-structured interview.

## **Be neutral**

While actively listening, you want to remain as neutral as possible. Practice non-judgmental listening by setting aside your own biases, points of view, and opinions.

Comments, such as “You think that?” or “That is not possible!” will infer your opinion and judgment on the participant and might end the discussion or make them change their responses to fit into the group rather than share their honest opinions.

## **Using probes**

Probes help to clarify what the participants have said and to get more detailed information about the topic, allowing them to elaborate on the questions you asked.

Some examples of probes that can be used include “Please tell me (more) about...”, “Could you explain what you mean by...” and “Can you tell me something else about...”.

Do not use probes that might make assumptions, such as “So you are telling us that ... right?” or a leading question that shows you are an unbiased listener such as “Don’t you think ...”.

The researcher should not assume the opinions of the participants. Avoid using probes while the participants speak since it might influence how they answer the questions. If you need to follow up on something they said, make a note and ask about it when they have finished their thoughts.

## **Time management**

During focus group/semi-structured interviews, as the facilitator (PI/study team), it is your responsibility to structure the focus group/semi-structured interview so that you get responses to your questions and get the level of detail needed to answer your research questions appropriately.

Sometimes, participants will stray from the topic or share beyond your research question. You should politely acknowledge your time together and that there are some other aspects of their experience that you are interested in.

A well-developed focus group/semi-structured interview facilitator guide will include prompts that remind you to do a time check to ensure the session progresses appropriately. If you find that you are running out of time before covering all your questions, use your remaining time for the most important questions.

# Focus group/semi-structured interview facilitator guide





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Queen's University  
Vice-Principal Research  
Research, Compliance, Training, and Ethics  
355 King Street West  
Kingston, Ontario  
K7L 2X3  
[chair.greb@queensu.ca](mailto:chair.greb@queensu.ca), [hsreb@queensu.ca](mailto:hsreb@queensu.ca)  
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## Getting started

### About this focus group/semi-structured interview facilitator guide

#### Purpose of this facilitator guide

This guide provides the Primary Investigator/study team a reference document to help prepare the Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template and ethically facilitate a focus group/semi-structured interview.

The PI/study team should use this guide for the following purposes:

1. To help prepare your focus group/semi-structured interview script, that you will submit to the REB for approval, prior to conducting your focus group/semi-structured interview session.
2. To help provide guidance when actively conducting your focus group/semi-structured interview discussion session.

The PI/study team (facilitator of the focus group/semi-structured interview) is to finalize this guide by including the REB approved script and additional study specific information.

#### How is this guide organized?

This section, "Getting started," contains preparation information for understanding the way this facilitator guide is structured, including the purpose, what's inside, text layout and the graphic cues.

The section, "Focus group/semi-structured interview session day preparation" includes information to help prepare you for conducting the focus group/semi-structured interview session, such as getting things ready, required materials, and room set-up.

Finally, the section, "Start your focus group/semi-structured interview session", is divided into 3 parts, introduction, group discussion, and wrap-up.

#### What will I find in this guide?

This facilitator guide contains:

- Tips on how to conduct a focus group/semi-structured interview session, including set-up.
- Key points that must be covered.
- A delivery sequence.
- A section ("Start your focus group/semi-structured interview session") that breaks down the focus group/semi-structured interview discussion session, with points that require you to reference your REB approved Focus group/semi-structured interview Script.

## How is the text laid out in this guide?







Every action is described in this guide by a text block like this one, with a margin icon, a title line, and the actual text. The icons are designed to help catch your eye and draw quick attention to “what to do and how to do it.” For example, the icon to the left indicates that you, the PI/study team, say something next. The title line gives a brief description of what to do and is followed by the actual script/instruction set/key points/etc. that are needed to complete the action.

## Important note “call-out” boxes

Important note: You may also occasionally find important notes throughout the text of this guide, such as this one. These shaded boxes provide particularly important information in an attention-getting format.

## Graphic cues

These icons are found in the left margin and indicate an action that the facilitator must take.

Icon	Description
	<p><b>Say:</b></p> <p>Indicates that you, the facilitator (PI/study team), say something to the participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bullet points are topics to consider or include your own words.</li><li>• Quotes are specific dialogue you should say.</li><li>• The grey “call-out” box is an:</li></ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px;"><p>Important note: Reminding you to include the wording from your REB approved script.</p></div>
	<p><b>Do:</b></p> <p>Indicates that you, the facilitator (PI/study team) do something (i.e., collect and/or review documents, provide participants with documents, etc.).</p>
	<p><b>Instructions:</b></p> <p>Indicates that you, the facilitator (PI/study team), will need to prepare something, ask/answer something, or an additional item that must be addressed. There could be multiple items associated with this icon.</p>
	<p><b>Time:</b></p> <p>Indicates that you, the facilitator (PI/study team), should check the time to ensure the session progresses appropriately. If you run out of time before covering all questions, use your remaining time for the most important questions.</p>

## Focus group/semi-structured interview session day preparation

It's the day of your focus group/semi-structured interview session. Below are important steps you must take to get ready before your participants arrive. Use the template below, **Start your focus group/semi-structured interview session**, when preparing for the facilitation of the session.

### Required planning

#### Follow the focus group/semi-structured interview script Template

Important note: submit your script to the REB for approval, you must do so before conducting your focus group/semi-structured interview session.

The focus group/semi-structured interview script template provides a framework for the facilitator to probe and ask questions. The script will help participants share their experiences in a focused and meaningful manner. Facilitators should follow the focus group/semi-structured interview script template as much as possible to increase the credibility of the research results.

Using a script also makes data collection more efficient. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for clearer responses, based on the script. Straying from the REB approved Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template is strongly discouraged because the questions on the script are essential to gather the data that is needed.

#### Use prompts and probes to guide discussion

The facilitator should stimulate discussion and participation. A few suggested techniques are:

- Repeat the question: Repetition gives more time to think.
- Pause for the answer: A thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- Repeat the reply: Hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation.
- Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions: They induce more detailed information

Avoid "yes-or-no" and "why" questions. Yes or no questions are one-dimensional and do not stimulate discussion. "Why" questions put people on the defensive and cause them to take "politically correct" sides on controversial issues.

#### Manage level of participation and engagement

In focus group/semi-structured interviews, it is not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. To balance participation and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute, you might consider addressing questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk, giving nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period) and intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion.

## Required materials

- Focus group/semi-structured interview script: This is the script that was submitted to the REB and approved by the REB prior to conducting the focus group/semi-structured interview session.
- Letter of Information/Consent form (e.g., enough copies for all participants).
- Extra pens for participants to sign consent forms.
- Audio/video recorder: If you plan to record the focus group/semi-structured interview, arrange for devices that allow you to do so such as tape recorders, cameras, laptops, etc. Also remember to bring any chargers/extra batteries to the session.
- Pencils and paper: Ideally, notes about a group discussion are made in addition to audio recording. Extra writing utensils, in case the lead in a pencil breaks/ a pen runs out of ink, and a notepad with sufficient paper for taking notes. If providing participants with notepads, ensure an appropriate number.
- Name tags or badges (if applicable).
- If you plan to provide visual instructions/information, arrange for relevant materials such as a flip chart, projector, enough printed copies, etc.
- Food, drinks, and utensils (e.g., plates, cups, napkins, etc.) if you plan to provide meals/snacks during the discussion.

## Room set-up

- Offer a clean and welcoming space to participants with materials ready to use.
- The room must be comfortable (warm or cool enough).
- Check the location of restrooms and water fountains and make sure these are easy to find and access for participants.
- Consider where snacks will be served. You might want to dedicate an extra table to accommodate the food/drink, utensils, name tags, badges or any other material provided to participants.
- There should be enough lighting for participants to be able to see clearly but without being too bright.
- Make sure there is some degree of privacy in your room. Draw the curtains and close the door once all participants have arrived.
- Have enough chairs for all participants and facilitators/moderators.
- Arrange chairs (not too close to each other) in a way that provides comfort to all participants, (i.e., putting chairs in a semi-circle or around working tables is usually a good seating arrangement).
- Arrange the position of slides/flipcharts/teleconferencing devices to make sure all participants have an unobstructed view of the visuals and don't need to turn around during discussion.
- Position your audio recording device in an appropriate place where it will capture all the dialogue in the room.
- If you are recording video, ensure that the camera will capture all the participants in the room.
- Check the power supplies and outlets; there should be enough to accommodate charging of electronic devices and are well located.
- As the session progresses, keep the space clean of any clutter and rearrange materials as needed.

### Focus group/semi-structured interview discussion time at a glance

The table below should reflect the time participants will spend on each section of the focus group/semi-structured interview discussion. The total length of time of a focus group/semi-structured interview session must be approved by the REB.

Time	Section	Description
10-15 minutes.	Part 1: Introduction	Provides participants with information about objectives of the focus group/semi-structured interview, confidentiality and obtain consent to participate in the study.
30-60 minutes	Part 2: Group Discussion	Group discussion based on the Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template. Provide prompts to engage participation.
5 minutes	Part 3: Wrap-up	Thank the participants, provide any applicable surveys, and remind them about confidentiality.

## Start your focus group/semi-structured interview session



### Say:

- Your name and position.
- The name of any other facilitators/study team members in the room.
- Purpose of the focus group/semi-structured interview: state the purpose of doing the focus group/semi-structured interview session, study title and topics for focus group/semi-structured interview discussion. Provide explanation about study objectives.
- Explain your role as facilitator for the discussion.



### Do:

- Point out refreshments if available, name tags if used.
- Emphasize that people should use their first name or pseudonym only.



### Say:

- Introduce the letter of information/verbal consent script to participants.

Important note: You must follow the script included in the Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template that was approved by the REB.



### Do:

- Provide participants with **Letter of Information/Informed Consent Form**.



### Instructions:

- Review the letter of information, ask if there are any questions about the consent process and answer them.



### Do:

- Document consent (collect signed consent forms or fill out the verbal consent log) and ensure that participants have a copy of the letter of information to take with them.





**Say:**

- Remind participants about confidentiality.
- The information collected from each person will be associated with participants as a group.
- Quotes or ideas will not be identified with any specific person in the group and remain confidential to the extent permitted by law.
- The researchers cannot guarantee that confidentiality will be honoured by everyone in the room. (however, assure that confidentiality will be honoured in 1:1 semi-structured interviews).
- Participation is voluntary and can stop at any time, but withdrawal is not possible due to the interconnected nature of the group discussion.
- Anything said and heard in the room must stay in the room.
- Explain that you might intervene if discussion is out of topic.
- State time commitment for the session.

Important note: You must follow the script included in the Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template that was approved by the REB.

Important note: If you plan to record this focus group/semi-structured interview session and perform transcription, provide this information to participants.



**Say:**

- Remind participants that session will be recorded (if applicable to your study).
- Describe data management of files generated during focus group/semi-structured interview discussion, specifically specify how video, audio and notes will be recorded, for how long they will be stored and what files will be used for analysis.
- Provide details about transcription (if applicable to your study).
- State that names will be removed from transcripts and only research team will have access to data.



**Do:**

Hand out any materials that the participants will need during the focus group/semi-structured interview including pens or scrap paper. Give them a few minutes to read over any written material, noting that they can make annotations. At this point, the group discussion can begin.



**Say:**

"Let's begin. Let's learn more about each other by going around the room."



**Do:**

- Allow group members to quickly introduce themselves.
- Remind participants that it is, **first names or pseudonyms only**.



**Time:**

- Check the time to ensure the session progresses appropriately.

Conclusion of Part 1

**Part 2: Group Discussion (30 – 60 min)**



**Instructions:**

Focus group/semi-structured interview discussion begins with the facilitator asking the first question (you can provide participants with the questions on a sheet of paper or screen, if applicable).



**Do:**

- Prompt discussion for general responses of participants to each question.
- Follow the focus group/semi-structured interview script developed for the session.

Important note: You must follow the script included in the Focus group/semi-structured interview Script Template that was approved by the REB.

At the end of the session, ask participants if there is something that needs to be shared/added before wrap-up.



**Time:**

- Check the time to ensure the session progresses appropriately.

Conclusion of Part 2

**Part 3: Wrap-up (5 min)**



**Say:**

“What is said in the room should stay in the room.”



**Instructions:**

Briefly explain how the information obtained in this session will be used for research purposes; disclose any method of follow-up and/or research dissemination.

- Remind participants that video/audio/transcripts obtained will be used for data analysis.
- Give contact information for participants interested in results.
- Thank participants for their time.
- Introduce any surveys/questionnaires, if applicable to your study.

Conclusion of Part 3