
TIP SHEET: CAPTURING, ANALYZING, AND USING QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative (narrative) data collected from interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions on surveys can be very useful in program design and evaluation. Qualitative methods are well suited to situations when your questions are complex or unstructured, or when you are seeking a nuanced understanding of people's attitudes and experiences. Methods of capturing, analyzing, and reporting on qualitative findings are not always straightforward. Use this tip sheet to help plan your approach.

CAPTURING DATA FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Whether you are conducting an interview or a focus group, you will need to decide on one or more methods of capturing data reliably. Options include:

➤ **USE A NOTE-TAKER**

It is very difficult to take notes while you are facilitating, so it is a good idea to designate a separate note-taker. Make sure the person you choose is prepared, and understands what you are trying to get out of the experience.

➤ **TAKE YOUR OWN NOTES**

Although difficult to manage, this may be the most practical option in some cases. Whether you take your own notes or have someone else take notes, decide in advance whether you will want direct quotes, paraphrases, or some combination of the two.

➤ **CAPTURE CONTENT THROUGH ACTIVITIES**

It can be more engaging for participants to conduct group interviews or focus groups in an active, participatory way. If you have participants provide input on sticky notes or chart paper, or using online tools like Miro, Google Jamboard, or a Zoom whiteboard, then you will not have as much need for a separate note taker.

➤ **RECORD THE FOCUS GROUP OR INTERVIEW**

If the accuracy of direct quotes is a major priority, you may want to make an audio, video, or Zoom recording of your focus group or interview. If you do this, make sure to get the approval of your participants in advance. While recording has many advantages, recording can make some participants uncomfortable. Also, transcribing can be time-consuming, though it has become less so as transcription apps (e.g Otter AI, Transcribe) have become more accessible.

ANALYZING QUALITATIVE DATA

The analysis of qualitative data is in some ways more art than science. Nevertheless, there are two primary ways of clustering feedback from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey comments to identify themes.

➤ **CLUSTERING COMMENTS INTO PREDETERMINED OR TOP-DOWN CATEGORIES**

If you are collecting data on a particular theme or outcome (aligned to your program's goals), you may want to sort comments into categories that you have defined in advance.

➤ **CLUSTERING COMMENTS INTO EMERGENT CATEGORIES**

Some comments may not fit into predetermined categories. And in some cases, you may not have categories in mind in advance. In these instances, you will want to group similar comments together and determine categories after the fact, based on the information you have collected. Often, you will combine both of these approaches (i.e. use both predetermined and emergent categories).

COMMUNICATING QUALITATIVE DATA

Here are some general tips about communicating qualitative data to internal and external audiences:

- **INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**
As with any data that you collect from participants, it is a good idea to share your findings with them when you are finished. Stakeholders can also help with the interpretation of findings.
- **USE VISUALS AS APPROPRIATE**
Visual representations, such as word clouds or story boards, can provide a general summary of qualitative findings. In general, they should accompany rather than substitute for a narrative summary. [Worditout](#), [WordArt](#), and [Tagxedo](#) are websites that will generate word clouds. Survey Monkey can also generate a word cloud from open-ended survey question responses.
- **PRESENT DIRECT QUOTES AS EVIDENCE**
While you will want to summarize findings and report major themes in a narrative format, direct quotes can be used as evidence to support your conclusions; they can also make a report more interesting to read. If you are taking notes, listen carefully for “juicy” quotes so that you can write down verbatim.
- **RESIST THE URGE TO QUANTIFY WITH SPECIFICITY**
Qualitative data is just that – qualitative; try to avoid counting comments or using numbers or percentages. If you want to express magnitude, use general terms like “many,” “most,” “some,” or “a few.”

SAMPLE EXCERPT FROM REPORT ON FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS:

“Suggestions for Coaching Improvement: Coaches responded to the question: How can we make the Tutoring Program better? They had specific requests for more training in general as well as greater training around the materials and behavior management.

Training in General

- *More frequent trainings and student progress reports would help.*
- *More effective training*
- *1 or 2 more training sessions*
- *You should have more of the training by linguistics tutors. I found that very interesting & helpful.*

Training around behavior management

- *Provide a little more training on how to work with your reader when they won't cooperate.*
- *We need to be taught better how to deal with non-cooperative kids - training video, role play, something.*
- *Possible making a list that the tutors can have that give skills to deal with difficult student behavior*

Training around materials and reading instruction

- *I think we need more training on how to use the Reading Journal, especially how to teach phonics.*
- *Have training session on phonics.*
- *More training on how to use the power reader journal.”*

Content courtesy of MEM Consultants