

SCRIBE Guidelines

First Point: It is important to realize that you are not actually a part of the focus group session. Your sole job is to record what you witness as faithfully as possible without impacting the dialogue.

Presentation and Non-Participation

Attire: Dress “business casual,” and comfortably. Dress modestly. Typical work attire will probably suffice. Avoid t-shirts with band names, references to movies, super heroes, etc., or catchy phrases. Dress in a non-distracting, neutral fashion.

The Non-Participating Observer: The moderator may rely on you to help greet the participants when they arrive, and you should be pointed out to the participants, so they know you are there and what you are doing. During the session itself, however, your only role is to take notes as faithfully as you can. Participants may make comments that are interesting to you, but remember: 1) the moderator is in charge of facilitating the actual session, and 2) the session is about what the participants have to say, NOT about what you already know or have to say. Part of your job is to stay out of the dialogue altogether. Sit away from the table altogether, so that you don’t get mistaken for an active participant in the focus group session. Have a comfortable spot away from the table, or in a corner, but near enough where you can see everyone plainly and hear everyone clearly.

Recording Your Observations

Tools of the Trade: Use a steno pad. Use black or blue ink pens (and not pencil), and bring at least two or three pens.

Strive for Legibility: Don’t worry about writing neatly or with pretty penmanship. Sloppy is ok, as long as your notes are clear and legible later. Remember, recording the dialogue is the important part.

Draw a Map: When everyone is settled, draw a reference map of seating at the table and note any pseudonyms or nicknames you might use to refer to specific participants. The map doesn’t have to be pretty, just accurate and legible when you go back to it.

Keep Your Notes Confidential: Generally speaking, don’t share the notes you take with the participants. Sharing notes can lead to equivocation, and even hurt feelings, even when you have been respectful and faithful in what you have recorded.

Fidelity is Paramount: It is important that you faithfully record what is said in the session. However, several things will make this task a challenge. First, the pace of dialogue may likely be such that you cannot capture word-for-word everything that is said. Do your best to capture the comments as faithfully as possible, even when you have to synthesize. Don’t be afraid to use “shorthand” to record the dialogue, but make sure you know what that shorthand means later. Second, people are going to cut each other off, and people are going to talk over each other. Develop a CONSISTENT annotation for noting these things. Here are some suggestions:

Use shorthand to annotate who said what:

gg: “I mostly go to the library to look up stuff on the computer.”

Use dashes to denote when a person is being talked over:

Participant 1: “Then I told him that I needed –”

SCRIBE Guidelines

Participant 2: "I had the same problem!"

Participant 1: "— some help understanding PubMed."

Use ellipses for dialogue that simply stops abruptly or trails off.

Participant 1: "Well, I did tell him..."

Matching Notes to Recordings: Try to capture bits of dialogue that will aid in matching your notes to the recordings. Remember, your notes are like a guide map to the transcripts that come out of the recording. Especially, one role you fulfill is to note who said what. It won't be necessary for us to match comments with a specific person through your notes. However, the goal should be to match comments consistently with the same person in context of the dialogue itself. It might not always be easy to tell voices apart in the recordings. If someone's comments consistently uncover a specific position from a given participant, however, it might be vital to note that specific person's train of thoughts throughout the session.

Use Consistent Annotation: Use annotation that helps you to get easily through the session with the best notes you can manage. However, use shorthand and annotation that is consistent throughout your notes.

Managing Clarity in Your Notes: Natural language use is very contextual. Dialogue that seems obvious at the time may not be totally clear in transcripts. Try as best you can to annotate context that you think will clarify dialogue. Often, verbal communication is clarified by body language, glances, or hand gestures that will not show up in transcripts. Also, people will be talking in rapid succession with each other, and it is almost certain that people will talk over each other, and that dialogue will intertwine several different voices at the same time.

Transcribing Your Notes You will need to type up your notes for submission. Please turn in both your written notes and the typed copy of them. You are the best person to type up these notes, as only you will have the first-hand knowledge of what they contain. You are also the best candidate to actually read your own handwriting.

Returning to Your Notes: Remember that reliability is as much an issue for qualitative research as it is for quantitative research. Reliability means consistency of measurement, which (for focus group research) means that the record of the dialogue should be as faithful to what was actually said as possible. Try to paraphrase as little as possible.

Don't Wait: Don't wait to type up your notes. During and after the session, you may think that your understanding of the notes is fixed in your mind. However, if you wait too long to type them up, nuances in your own notes will become fuzzy. At most, you should type up your notes on the next actual day.

Have Fun! Do everything in your power to create faithful notes, and try your best to keep up. However, enjoy the experience, and everyone will get more out of the focus group session. Remember, you are doing something (that should be) interesting, and maybe a bit out of the ordinary for everyone.

FURTHER QUESTIONS? Please contact me with specific questions. My contact information will be available through the focus group moderator or the person coordinating this research at your college.

SCRIBE Guidelines

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