

STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP



Description

This approach to running a focus group draws on the “Nominal Group Technique” (NGT), a structured method for group brainstorming that encourages contributions from everyone.

When to Use

It is particularly useful in situations when some group members are much more vocal than others or think better in silence. This is especially the case when the issue is controversial or there is disagreement or conflict.

The role of the facilitator

The most important aspect of the NGT approach is that the facilitator establishes a way of working in which participants can share ideas without comment. They will need to emphasise that the activity provides a non-judgemental setting for eliciting answers to a question which does not have one easy answer.

Carrying out the activity

1. **Materials needed:** paper and pen or pencil for each individual, flipchart, marking pens, tape.
2. **Decide on the question(s).** We have used questions such as ‘*What makes school difficult?*’ Each school has its own terms for ‘barriers’ and supports’ and you should formulate questions that make sense in your school.
3. **Establish a group** of no more than 10 pupils. We have found that single sex groups work more effectively than mixed groups..
4. **Introduce the task.** Your task introduction should affirm that you are going to ask participants to give their answers to group questions and that you do not want any verbal commentary or physical reaction to what is said. We have found that parodying negative responses helps to clarify this point. You should also tell the group that you will deliberately react in the same non-judgemental way to all the answers they give and that your intention is to gather all their answers to a question about life in school and the group will vote – ‘Just like a talent contest’!
5. **Present the question** you want the group to answer on a flip chart or board and make sure that it will remain on display throughout the session. You need to make sure that every one understands the question.
6. **Generate answers.** Each team member silently thinks of and writes down (or represents in some way) as many answers as possible in a set period of time (5 to 10 minutes). Children with literacy difficulties require support in working with the lists of ideas.
7. **Record answers.** Each member in turn is invited to give one idea. All the answers are recorded on the flipchart.
8. No discussion is allowed at this stage, not even questions for clarification.

9. Ideas given do not need to be from written lists. Indeed, as time goes on, many ideas will not be.
10. A member may “pass” his or her turn, and may then add an idea on a subsequent turn.
11. Continue around the group until all members pass or for an agreed-upon length of time.
12. **The group then discusses each idea in turn.** Wording may be changed only when the originator of the idea agrees. Ideas may be deleted from the list but only by unanimous agreement. Discussion may clarify meaning, explain logic or analysis, raise and answer questions, or state agreement or disagreement.
13. **Keep all ideas visible.** When ideas overflow to additional flipchart pages, post previous pages around the room so all ideas are still visible to everyone.

Voting and discussing the vote

- Display the list of answers that you have written on the flip chart. Combine duplicate items in discussion with the participants.
- Number all items.
- Tell the participants that they have to select the 5 items that are most important to them. They can give 5 points to the most important and item, 4 points to the next, and so on.
- Each choice is written on a voting paper:

Number of the answer	Number of points
•	• 5
•	• 4
•	• 3
•	• 2
•	• 1

- Collect the papers, shuffle them (to demonstrate anonymity) and then record on a flipchart or whiteboard. If possible enlist someone to sum the scores at the end of voting in order that you can maintain the flow of the session. The easiest way to record votes is for the scribe to write all the individual rankings next to each choice. For each item, the rankings are totalled next to the individual rankings.
- Hold a brief discussion of the vote. The purpose of the discussion is to look at dramatic voting differences, such as an item that received both 5 and 1 ratings, and avoid errors from incorrect information or understandings about the item. The discussion should not result in pressure on anyone to change their vote.
- Discussion should be equally balanced among all ideas. You should not allow discussion to turn into argument. The primary purpose of the discussion is clarification. It is not to resolve differences of opinion.

Example of how schools used this method

A focus group using NGT was run in a large secondary school with two mixed groups of Year 7 pupils. A teaching assistant supported the children with literacy difficulties while the teacher led the group. The need for a calm start was clear when, in one of the groups a boy who had become distressed in an event prior to the NGT found it very difficult to settle and participate. While this did not ruin the event it did point to the need for a managed start which was smoothly achieved in the second group. The opportunity to offer ideas without peer commentary was a valuable part of the activity. The pupils were very interested in both the process and the results of their voting- these are shown in the table below. The teacher felt that a group size of ten was optimal and that she would be interested to run one again with single sex groups.

Rank order of ideas	Question posed: What do you find difficult in school?	No of points in the vote with max = 50 (if all 10 pupils gave 5 points)
1	Teachers not being fair	32
2	Teachers not listening	26
3	Bullying	16
4	Teachers pick on you	16
5	Long lessons	11
6	Getting the blame unfairly	11
7	Friends talking and distracting	9
8	People who are annoying	9
9	Talking behind backs	8
10	Atmosphere	7
11	Being taught by teachers who aren't subject specialists	6
12	Lessons on the board – copying	4
13	Touching girls	3
14	Punishments	3
15	The space we work in e.g. Small classrooms are claustrophobic	2
16	People turning off computers	2
17	Firewall blocking things	2

Mr Allen used this method in a primary school with a small group of year 4 children with impairments who knew each other well. He reminded them of the previous week when the whole school had considered what were the good and bad things about school. He said that if teachers knew what made school difficult for pupils then they could make it better. There were things he found difficult, no-one does everything perfectly. It was important to know their opinions. He asked them 'What stops you doing better in school?' and gave them five minutes to write down in a list, saying, 'It doesn't matter about spelling. List all the things that you can think of that cause a problem for you at school. I'll ask you to try and think of at least five things. At this point some of you will be thinking, "What does Mr Allen want me to say?" Just be honest, if it's a level of criticism feel free to say so.'



Focus Group: Using structured discussion

Rank	What stops us doing better in school ?	Points
1	Getting angry	21
6	People annoying me in class	10
4	Feeling tired	12
3	Teachers being unfair	17
2	Friend being unkind	19
5	Not understanding class-work	11