



Effective Communication Strategies for Interviews and Focus Groups

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Conveying a clear message to intended recipients is central to effective communication, especially during interviews and focus groups for evaluation. Interviewers' communication skills can motivate study participants or impede them from disclosing sensitive information. Equally important, the evaluator's comfort level can affect how questions are asked and the quality of communication. Using strategies to enhance the quality of both verbal and nonverbal communication can both improve the quality of collected data and help create a positive experience for participants.

This checklist presents key concepts to keep in mind while planning interviews and focus groups as well as during the implementation of protocols that will guide such data collection events. We encourage you to practice these communication strategies before data collection.

Verbal Communication

There are some considerations for using verbal communication skills while conducting interviews and focus groups. This section will help you to decide how to ask a question and communicate with your intended audience. Also, paying attention to common communication pitfalls will assist in creating a welcoming, focused environment.

Below are strategies you can use in your practice.

1. Use inclusive language.

Inclusive language is free from terms or phrases that convey bias that may make some groups feel left out. When you are thoughtful about the words you use, you create an environment of clarity and respect. Avoid suggesting or perpetuating generalizations and stereotypes about gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or other aspects of identity. When meeting with program staff, pay attention to the vocabulary they use, as it is often the same vocabulary that you should use. Familiarize yourself with the background of the participants and ask program staff or potential participants themselves if there are any specific words or phrases to avoid or use.

Here are some ways to ensure mindful use of inclusive language:



- Ask a trusted colleague to inform you when you use insensitive language, whether in conversation or after conducting interviews and focus groups.
- When meeting with program staff, pay attention to the vocabulary they use, as it is often the same vocabulary that you should use.
- Familiarize yourself with the backgrounds of the participants, and ask program staff or potential participants themselves if there are any specific words or phrases to avoid or use.
- Keep your greetings gender-neutral. “You guys,” and “Hey, ladies” may not apply to all participants. Instead, try using “Hey” and “Hello, everyone!”
- Practice using gender-free or gender-neutral language so you are more at ease when conducting interviews or focus groups.
- Always reflect on your use of inclusive language after data collection events. Either debrief with your note-taker (ask questions regarding the flow of the session and if any improper terms were used) or listen to recordings of your interviews or focus groups and reflect on your word usage. This will help you become more aware of your speech patterns so you can make needed adjustments in the future.

2. Ask ONE question at a time.

Ask one clear question at a time. That may sound simple, but it can be challenging once you are in an interview or a focus group. In conversational speech, it’s common to ramble or ask run-on questions. In an interview setting, this can confuse participants.

Here are tips for limiting rambling and run-on questions:

- Practice your protocol with colleagues, and make sure you are familiar with all the questions that you plan to ask.
- Ask multi-part questions one part at a time.
- To stop yourself from asking multiple questions at once, pause and breathe. Keep in mind that if the participants do not understand your question, they will ask for clarification.
- Practice singing ABCs, or any short nursery rhyme that you are familiar with, silently to yourself. This will help you fill the silence while waiting for the participants to process the question you asked.
- Be prepared to repeat the question using different prompts.

3. Limit use of filler words.

Filler words are words that you use when you think, such as *umm*, *you know*, *so*, and *like*.

Filler words interrupt the flow of conversation and the transcription process. Additionally, filler words can be distracting and hinder desired responses. Avoiding filler words will improve your communication by forcing you to ask a succinct and coherent question.

Here are some exercises you can do to limit your use of filler words:

- Listen to recordings of past interviews or focus group you have conducted. Count the number of times you used filler words, and note which filler words you use most often. This practice helps you realize how often you use them.
- Watch or listen to your favorite interviewers (e.g., on a radio program or podcast) to pick up on their techniques to avoid filler words.

4. Use OARS.

OARS—an acronym for *open-ended questions, affirmation, reflective listening, and summaries*—is often used by counselors and social workers. This method is also efficient in interviews and focus groups.

- Ask **open-ended questions**: This is a common strategy in interviews and focus groups as it encourages in-depth responses. When chatting with someone you trust, practice asking follow-up questions that are open-ended.
- Provide **affirmations**: These affirmations can be head nods or a general neutral agreement such as “That must have been difficult for you” and “I see.” Providing affirmation will improve your listening skills. You can practice affirmation by nodding when someone is sharing something personal. Do not respond with your stories as an attempt to relate with someone else. Nod and listen. If you are uncomfortable, use the suggested affirmation phrases above.
- Incorporate **reflections**: Reflections are a way to indicate to interviewees or focus group participants that you are listening. Reflections are a follow-up to affirmations. If a participant does not have anything else to share after you provide affirmation, offer reflective phrases that indicate that you heard them. For example, if they are expressing a feeling, make sure to take the opportunity to confirm the feeling that they are sharing. Here are some examples:
 - “It sounds like you are frustrated with the situation.”
 - “This is an exciting time for you!”
 - “Thank you for sharing your struggles.”
- Conclude a topic with a **summary**. A summary conveys the overall ideas that were shared. Summarizing a topic allows the participants to amend any ideas they shared and is a way to move on to the next topic without participants feeling as if the interview or focus group is disjointed. Summarizing can be challenging because it forces you to be succinct and inclusive of all the ideas. A summary can go something like this: “We discussed X, Y, and Z; the ideas shared include A, B, C, and D. Are there any other ideas that you would like to add or clarify?”

For more information about Motivational Interviewing or OARS, visit <https://bit.ly/2G0djiV>

Non-Verbal Communication

Interview and focus group protocol development usually focuses on what words will be said and rarely considers non-verbal communication—*how* those words will be presented. Albert Mehrabian (1971) brought this idea to the forefront in his book *Silent Messages*. Mehrabian proposed that communication is 55% body language, 38% intonation, and 7% words. Each of these is important for effective communication. Though there is some controversy as to the exact breakdown of verbal versus non-verbal communication, it remains widely accepted that how a message is presented will affect how it is received. If you plan only the words to be said, you will miss a substantial portion of what will be communicated.

5. Be aware of cultural context.

Cultural contexts vary greatly. Understanding the cultural context before starting data collection is critical for effective communication.

Consider using unobtrusive observations or asking program staff to learn about your targeted population. Using the information gathered, you can apply relevant cues when conducting your interviews or focus groups. Here are some tips for starting to learn about the cultural context of your data collection setting:

- Ask the program staff or observe program participants directly:
 - How do they greet each other?
 - What do they wear? This is to ensure that your outfit matches the level of formality of the participants.
 - How do they speak to each other? What language do they speak with each other? What phrases or words do they use?
 - What notable types of body language do the participants use when communicating with each other?
 - Is there a notable deference to one or more persons in the group? Who are the formal and informal leaders?
 - Important note: Do not adopt elements of a culture that you do not belong to. That is cultural appropriation, which is offensive to many.
- As lines of the global community become increasingly blurred, awareness of unique cultural differences is imperative and cultural awareness practices are essential. Consider what your **body language** is communicating in your culture and determine what is appropriate in the cultural context in what you are collecting data. Here are some resources to help you consider culturally based characteristics of body language:
 - “Gestures to Avoid in Cross-Cultural Business” by Gayle Cotton: <http://bit.ly/cultural-gest>
 - “Cultural Differences in Body Language to be Aware Of” by Sophie Thompson: <http://bit.ly/cultural-bl>

- “The Shocking Differences in Basic Body Language Around the World” by Kathleen Elkins and Mike Nudelman: <http://bit.ly/bl-diff>

Some other types of cultural differences to be aware of during qualitative data collection, such as attitudes toward disclosure and conflict, are addressed in the following resource:

- “Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges” by Marcelle DuPraw and Marya Axner: <http://bit.ly/cc-chall>

There are many considerations when working across cultures. The keys are to **remain open** to new cultural experiences, **be humble** in recognizing your way is not the only way, and **exercise respect** toward others in all situations.

6. Use humble behaviors.

The context in which you are working and the style of interview you are conducting should determine your use of body language. It is important to periodically reflect on how you are holding yourself and what message you are communicating through your posture.

- Body language that is considered less threatening can make you appear more relaxed and interested in what others are saying:
 - Sitting forward or leaning forward while talking.
 - Keeping your arms relaxed.
 - Keeping your hands open and relaxed; refraining from having close fists.
 - Using a soft gaze and avoiding staring directly or intently at the speaker.
- Body language that conveys authority can make participants feel threatened and discourage them from sharing:
 - Sitting with your legs spread at shoulder distance apart.
 - Tenting (or steepling) your hands.
 - Stretching your torso to appear larger when standing or sitting.
 - Standing with your hands behind your back.

Although we have expressed these examples based in a Eurocentric culture, there are many other cultures to consider, and they cannot all be listed here. We suggest, regardless of the context, displaying genuine expressions that will create trust between you and the participants. One of the best ways to establish foundational trust is to be authentic. Your role is to listen to participants’ stories and not cast judgement.

7. Use mimicry and modeling.

Pro-social interactions are strengthened when an individual mimics the actions of another and vice versa. Interviewers can face a range of responses from participants, ranging from hostility or indifference to acceptance or excitement. Being conscious of your body language and how it conveys

a message is essential; by using mimicry and modeling, you may show acceptance, demonstrate desirable behavior, and convey your openness to communication.

Mimicry	Modeling
<p>If a person is accepting of the interview, use these actions to create a pro-social, relaxed setting where they are more likely to share their thoughts honestly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Show interest in their responses through eye contact, nodding, and open-body posture.• Use similar intonations and vocal levels as the interviewee.• Move (not too overtly) into a position that is similar to the interviewee. This mimicking can include your positioning in the seat, hand and leg placement, crossing of the legs, etc.	<p>If you are met with nervousness, indifference, or aggression, exhibiting the behavior you desire will help alter the actions of the interviewee. Use these actions to calm participants and provide a comfortable environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak calmly.• Keep an open posture; for example, relax your arms and keep your palms open.• Avoid gestures that the specific population is likely to perceive as aggressive (identify what is appropriate or not appropriate with the program staff).• Avoid common restrictive postures, such as crossing your arms. <p>These actions help calm participants and provide comfortable environment. Ultimately, if you face overt aggression with no foreseeable chance for change or it escalates to an unsafe level, take steps to remove yourself from the situation.</p>

Important Trauma-Focused Accessibility Consideration

Keep in mind that certain topics or contexts could be traumatic triggers for some participants. Topics that have a higher likelihood of generating emotional responses include gender identity, homelessness and housing, family, military experience, addiction, sexual activity, mental health, sexual identity, and abuse. This list is not comprehensive. Always thank participants for sharing their stories. If participants cry or express extreme emotions during the session, show acceptance of these feelings by providing affirmations.

If you are working with a group that you know has experienced trauma, consult with your population expert or program staff on how best to approach evaluation activities with these individuals. For further reading and insight on trauma-informed data collection, refer to this guide by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: <https://bit.ly/31mHkkm>

Resources for Additional Reading

- Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (1999). Motivational interviewing as a counseling style. In Enhancing motivation for a change in substance abuse treatment (Chapter 3). *Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series*, 35. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK64964/>
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- O'Donnell, J. T. (2016, July 06). *The sneaky trick to being likable in interviews*. Inc.com. <https://www.inc.com/jt-odonnell/how-being-a-copycat-can-land-you-a-job.html>
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Notes

- ¹ Although Ouen and Jeffrey are in the same discipline and same university, we have very different points of view and lifestyles. Ouen was born and raised in Malaysia, and her ethnicity is Chinese. Jeffrey was born and raised in the United States, and he is of European descent. Our shared discipline and cultural differences inspired this document.
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