

Small Discussion Group Facilitator Framework Guide

Overview and Purpose

Small discussion groups are an integral component of our low vision rehabilitation and research conference. These interactive, facilitated sessions bring together professionals and practitioners from diverse disciplines to address critical practice gaps in low vision care and rehabilitation.

What Are Small Discussion Groups?

Small discussion groups are structured learning experiences designed to:

- **Connect** participants across disciplines (occupational therapy, ophthalmology, education, rehabilitation, research, and more)
- **Reflect** on current practices, challenges, and evidence-based approaches
- **Spark Innovation** through collaborative dialogue and the sharing of homegrown solutions
- **Close Practice Gaps** by addressing specific, timely topics relevant to low vision rehabilitation

Why Small Discussion Groups?

The interdisciplinary nature of low vision care means that practitioners rarely have formal spaces to learn from colleagues with different expertise. Small discussion groups intentionally create these spaces by:

- **Leveraging Diverse Expertise:** Participants bring different professional backgrounds, clinical settings, and years of experience, creating rich learning opportunities
- **Moving Beyond Presentations:** Rather than passive listening, participants engage in active dialogue and collaborative problem-solving
- **Building Professional Networks:** Participants develop connections with colleagues who share their interests and challenges

- **Contributing to the Field:** Group discussions often generate insights that inform future research, tools, frameworks, and best practices

Group Parameters

- **Maximum Participant Capacity:** 20 participants
- **Duration:** 60 or 120 minutes
- **CME Credit:** CME credit will be awarded to participants for their attendance and participation
- **Setting:** Interactive, discussion-based (not lecture-based)
- **Discipline Diversity:** Expected to attract practitioners from multiple disciplines with varying levels of expertise in low vision

Facilitator Responsibilities and Expectations

Before the Conference

1. Proposal Development and Submission

Facilitators must submit a complete proposal that includes:

- **Group Title:** Clear, compelling title that reflects the specific focus or practice gap being addressed
- **Objective Statement:** A brief statement (1-2 sentences) describing what participants will accomplish or explore through the group discussion
- **Description:** A 2-3 sentence narrative that invites participation and explains why this topic matters for the field
- **Facilitator Information:** Names, credentials, affiliations, and contact information for all facilitators
- **Discussion Plan with Timeline:** A detailed outline of discussion questions organized by time segments (see section below for detailed requirements)

2. Preparation Requirements

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Facilitators should:

- Develop all discussion questions and supporting materials in advance
- Ensure questions are open-ended and designed to elicit diverse perspectives
- Identify any pre-conference materials (readings, surveys, case studies) that participants should receive beforehand or complete at the start of the session
- Consider how to establish common ground across disciplines by defining key terms or concepts
- Prepare to facilitate discussion in a way that balances participation, respects time constraints, and ensures all voices are heard
- Test any technology or materials that will be used during the discussion

During the Conference

1. Facilitation Practices

- **Start on Time:** Begin promptly at the scheduled start time
- **Set the Tone:** Create a welcoming, inclusive environment that encourages participation from all attendees
- **Manage Time:** Adhere to the planned timeline, adjusting as needed while ensuring all major discussion areas are addressed
- **Encourage Participation:** Use facilitation techniques to draw out quieter participants and ensure dominant voices don't monopolize discussion time
- **Ask Clarifying Questions:** Help participants deepen their thinking and connect their experiences to broader themes
- **Document Key Insights:** Capture key takeaways, themes, and ideas that emerge during discussion
- **Bridge Disciplines:** Help participants understand and learn from colleagues with different professional backgrounds

2. Creating Common Ground

Given the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of participants, facilitators should:

- **Define Key Terms and Concepts:** At the start, clarify terminology relevant to the discussion topic to ensure all participants share a common understanding
- **Use Pre-Conference Materials:** Provide brief readings, case studies, or other materials that establish foundational knowledge
- **Implement Pre-Discussion Surveys:** Ask participants to complete a brief survey (5-10 questions) before or at the start of the group to assess current practices, knowledge, or perspectives. This serves two purposes:
 - Helps facilitators understand the room's composition and expertise level
 - Provides concrete data to ground the discussion and identify areas of agreement or divergence
- **Share Evidence or Best Practices:** Briefly present (5 minutes maximum) relevant research findings, practice guidelines, or consensus-based information to contextualize the discussion

Discussion Plan Requirements

Every facilitator proposal must include a **Detailed Discussion Plan** that outlines the group's structure, questions, and timeline.

Overall Structure

The recommended structure follows a progression from concrete to conceptual and from current state to future vision (scale time appropriately for a 120 minute group; e.g. there may be a hands-on workshop component):

1. **Introduction** (5–10 minutes)
2. **Current Practice** (15–20 minutes)
3. **Evaluation/Analysis** (15–20 minutes)
4. **Future Thinking** (10–15 minutes)

5. **Wrap-Up and Connection** (5–10 minutes)

Section-by-Section Guidelines

1. Introduction (5–10 minutes)

Purpose: Build rapport, establish context, and allow participants to share their perspectives and goals.

Activities may include:

- Round-table introductions where participants briefly share their name, role/discipline, and experience level with the topic
- A framing question that invites participants to articulate what aspects of the topic are most relevant to their work (e.g., "How do you define functional vision?" or "What experiences have you had with BLV students?")
- Facilitator remarks about the relevance of the topic and how the discussion will unfold

Question Quality: Introductory questions should be welcoming and non-threatening, with no single "correct" answer.

2. Current Practice (15–20 minutes)

Purpose: Build a picture of how practitioners in the room currently address the topic; identify common approaches and areas of divergence.

Activities may include:

- Asking what tools, assessments, frameworks, or strategies participants currently use
- Exploring the populations they serve, settings in which they work, and frequency of implementation
- Discussing both formal (standardized) and informal (homegrown) approaches
- Using survey data to ground the conversation (e.g., "Three of you use formal assessment tools; several of you use informal observations—let's explore what works about each approach")

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Question Quality: Questions should be specific enough to generate substantive discussion but broad enough to include participants with different levels of experience.

3. Evaluation/Analysis (15–20 minutes)

Purpose: Dig deeper into the strengths, limitations, and practical considerations of current approaches; explore how different disciplines and settings approach similar challenges differently.

Activities may include:

- Identifying what works well about current practices and why
- Discussing barriers, limitations, and challenges
- Exploring how practices are adapted for different populations, environments, or client needs
- Discussing how findings or outcomes are communicated to other providers, clients, or stakeholders
- Comparing approaches across disciplines

Question Quality: Questions should prompt critical reflection and comparative thinking. Avoid yes/no questions; instead ask "How?" and "Why?" to deepen discussion.

4. Future Thinking (10–15 minutes)

Purpose: Shift from what is to what could be; encourage creative, collaborative problem-solving that may inform future research or practice innovations.

Activities may include:

- Asking about ideal solutions, tools, or frameworks participants wish existed
- Exploring how desired outcomes could be measured or tracked
- Identifying gaps that remain and brainstorming solutions
- Discussing potential for future collaboration across disciplines
- Proposing how the group's ideas might contribute to broader field advancement

Question Quality: Invite generative thinking with "magic wand" questions (e.g., "If you could design the ideal [tool/framework], what would it include?") and forward-looking prompts (e.g., "What frameworks might be useful for addressing this gap?").

5. Wrap-Up and Connection (5–10 minutes)

Purpose: Solidify key takeaways and foster ongoing professional relationships among participants.

Activities may include:

- Asking participants to identify one key idea, tool, or takeaway they want to explore further
- Collecting information from participants interested in staying connected after the conference (name and email) so facilitators can foster an ongoing learning community
- Brief summary of themes or insights that emerged
- Acknowledgment of the value of interdisciplinary collaboration

Question Quality: Keep closing questions simple, reflective, and actionable.

Additional Discussion Planning Considerations

Sub-Questions: Each main discussion question may include 2–4 sub-questions that clarify scope or provide optional branches depending on participant responses. Sub-questions should be identified as such (use lettered bullets: a, b, c, d).

Time Estimates: Estimate the time needed for each discussion section and adjust as needed to fit the 60-minute window. A typical allocation is:

- Introduction: 5–10 minutes
- Current Practice: 15–20 minutes
- Evaluation: 15–20 minutes
- Future Thinking: 10–15 minutes
- Wrap-Up: 5–10 minutes

Flexibility: While a detailed plan is required, facilitators should be prepared to adapt timing based on how discussion unfolds. If a particular area generates rich dialogue, it's acceptable to adjust other sections.

Supporting Materials and Tools

To establish common ground across disciplines and generate focused, substantive discussion, facilitators may use one or more of the following approaches:

1. Pre-Conference Readings

Distribute 1–2 brief, foundational readings (5–10 pages total) that:

- Establish key terminology or concepts
- Present evidence or best practices relevant to the topic
- Provide a shared knowledge base for participants with varying levels of expertise

Readings should be accessible to practitioners from all disciplines, not specialized to a single profession.

2. Brief Assessment Surveys

Develop a short survey (5–10 questions) that participants complete before the session or at the start. Surveys may ask about:

- Current practices or tools participants use
- Years of experience or expertise level
- Specific challenges they face
- Perspectives on key issues

Use survey results to:

- Understand the room's composition and expertise
- Identify common ground and areas of divergence to address in discussion

- Ask follow-up questions grounded in real data (e.g., "I see that half of you use standardized tools and half use informal observations—let's talk about what informs those choices")

3. Case Studies or Scenarios

Present brief, realistic case studies (1 paragraph) that illustrate the topic and prompt discussion. For example:

- "A 12-year-old student with central vision loss is struggling to keep up in math class. Her teacher wants to enlarge materials, but she says that makes it harder to track across problems. How would you assess her visual needs? What would you recommend?"

Cases should be realistic, relevant to multiple disciplines, and designed to reveal different perspectives on how professionals approach similar challenges.

4. Visual Frameworks or Decision Trees

If applicable to the topic, consider sharing a simplified framework, flowchart, or decision tree (visual representation) that participants can reference, critique, and improve through discussion. This gives participants a concrete starting point for conversation.

5. Role Cards or Perspective Prompts

In some cases, you may assign participants different professional roles or perspectives (e.g., occupational therapist, special education teacher, rehabilitation counselor) and ask them to respond to questions from that lens. This intentionally surfaces disciplinary differences and fosters appreciation for diverse viewpoints.

Proposal Submission Checklist

When submitting your proposal, please ensure you include all of the following:

Basic Information

- Group title (clear and compelling)
- Objective statement (1–2 sentences describing what participants will accomplish)

- Description (2–3 sentences explaining why this topic matters and inviting participation)
- Facilitator name(s), credentials, affiliation(s), and contact information
- Confirmation that facilitators understand CME credit will be awarded to participants

Discussion Plan

- Introduction section with framing questions (5–10 minutes)
- Current Practice section with 1–3 main questions and supporting sub-questions (15–20 minutes)
- Evaluation/Analysis section with 2–4 main questions and supporting sub-questions (15–20 minutes)
- Future Thinking section with forward-looking questions (10–15 minutes)
- Wrap-Up section with closing questions and connection-building activities (5–10 minutes)
- Time estimates provided for each section
- All questions reviewed to ensure they are open-ended, thought-provoking, and free from jargon that would exclude participants from other disciplines

Supporting Materials (select at least one)

- Pre-conference readings (optional but recommended)—if included, 2–3 pages maximum per reading, 1–2 readings total
- Pre-discussion survey (optional but recommended)—if included, 5–10 questions maximum
- Case studies or scenarios (optional)—brief, realistic examples that prompt discussion
- Visual framework or decision tree (optional)—relevant to topic, simplified for diverse audiences

- Other facilitator tools or materials that will enhance discussion

Final Review

- Questions avoid single "correct" answers and encourage diverse perspectives
- Language is accessible to participants from multiple disciplines
- The discussion plan balances time across sections
- Facilitators are prepared to manage group dynamics and ensure inclusive participation
- Facilitators understand the goal is to close practice gaps and generate practical insights, not to present content or lecture

Facilitator Tips for Success

Before the Session

1. **Know Your Room:** Arrive early. As participants enter, greet them and briefly assess the mix of disciplines and experience levels present. This will help you adjust your introduction and opening questions if needed.
2. **Review Surveys or Pre-Work:** If you distributed surveys or readings beforehand, review them and have key findings at hand to reference during discussion.
3. **Test Materials:** If using flip charts, slides, case studies, or other visual aids, set them up in advance and test any technology.

During the Session

4. **Establish Psychological Safety:** Make clear that the purpose is learning together, not debating who is "right." Affirm that different perspectives are valued and expected given disciplinary diversity.
5. **Use Inclusive Language:** Avoid jargon or discipline-specific terminology without defining it. When participants use specialized terms, thank them and briefly translate for the full group (e.g., "That's an interesting point about scotoma

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patterns—for those new to the topic, a scotoma is an area of vision loss or blind spot").

6. **Manage Dominant Voices:** Gently redirect if one or two people dominate. "That's a great example. Let me see if others have perspectives to share." Or, "I want to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute. [Person's name], I haven't heard from you yet—what's your experience?"
7. **Dig Deeper:** When someone shares an idea, ask follow-up questions to deepen thinking: "What led you to that approach?" "How did your client respond?" "What would you do differently knowing what you know now?"
8. **Make Connections Across Disciplines:** Explicitly highlight connections: "I'm hearing something interesting—both the OT and the teacher mentioned the importance of client motivation, but you're describing it differently. Can you talk about what that means in your respective contexts?"
9. **Capture Key Ideas:** Jot down themes, insights, or novel ideas that emerge. This shows participants their thinking is valued and gives you material to summarize at the end.
10. **Pace Yourself:** 60 minutes goes quickly. Keep an eye on the clock and gently move discussions along while honoring the depth already generated.

After the Session

11. **Follow Through on Connections:** If participants expressed interest in staying connected, follow up within 2 weeks with a summary of key themes discussed and facilitate introduction of interested participants (e.g., create a shared email thread or document where participants can continue dialogue).
12. **Reflect on What Worked:** Consider what aspects of the discussion were most generative or which questions prompted the richest dialogue. This reflection will inform future iterations.

Questions?



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For questions about the Small Discussion Group format, facilitator expectations, or proposal submission, please contact [Conference Planning Contact Information]. We look forward to your proposal and to creating an engaging, collaborative learning experience for conference participants!

See [Facilitator Form Worksheet](#) toolkit for more information on the submission form fields.

See Completed Form Examples:

- Example 1 [Supporting Visual Recovery in Neurological Vision Loss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Neurorehabilitation Intervention](#)
- Example 2 [OD–OT Collaboration in Low Vision Rehabilitation: Building a Consensus Practice Model to Maximize Outcomes](#)