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# Quick Tips

## Methods for Collecting Information

- **Survey:** collecting standardized information through structured questionnaires to generate quantitative data. Surveys may be mailed (surface and electronic), completed on site or through interviews, either face-to-face or telephone. Sample surveys use probability or purposive sampling.
- **Case Study:** in-depth examination of a particular case (program, group of participants, single individual, site/location). Case studies use multiple sources of information and methods to provide as complete a picture as possible.
- **Interviews:** information collected by talking with and listening to people, either face-to-face or over the telephone. Interviews range on a continuum from those which are tightly structured (as in a survey) to free flowing, conversational interviews.
- **Observation:** collecting information through "seeing" and "listening." Observations may be structured or unstructured.
- **Group assessment:** use of group processes to collect evaluation information such as nominal group technique, focus group, Delphi, brainstorming and community forums.
- **Expert or peer review:** examination by a review committee, panel of experts or peers.
- **Portfolio reviews:** collection of materials, including samples of work, that encompass the breadth and scope of the program activity being evaluated.
- **Testimonials:** individual statements by people indicating personal responses and reactions.
- **Tests:** use of established standards to assess knowledge, skill, performance such as in pen-and-pencil tests or skills tests.
- **Photographs, slides, videos:** use of photography to capture visual images.
- **Diaries, journals:** recording of events over time revealing the personal perspective of the writer/recorder.
- **Logs:** recording of chronological entries which are usually brief and factual.
- **Document analysis:** use of content analysis and other techniques to analyze and summarize printed material and existing information.
- **Other:**
  - Action cards:** use of index cards on which participants record what they did – the "action" – and when they reach their goal; primarily used in self-assessment.
  - Simulations:** use of models or mock-ups to solicit perceptions and reactions.
  - Problem stories:** narrative accounts of past, present or future situations as a means of identifying perceptions using fictional characters to externalize the problem situation.
  - Creative expression:** use of art forms to represent people's ideas and feeling as through stories, drama, dance, music, art.
  - Unobtrusive measures:** the gathering of information without the knowledge of the people in the setting such as the wear and tear on a "planted" mat in front of a display.

### References:

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Pretty, J., Guijt, I., Thompson, J., & Scoones, I. (1995). *Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide*. London: International Institute for Environment & Development.

Prepared by Ellen Taylor-Powell, Evaluation Specialist. Citation: Program Development and Evaluation, *Methods for Collecting Information, Quick Tips #8*, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Madison, WI. © 2002 Available in PDF format at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/resources/index.html> or contact: [pdande.webmaster@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:pdande.webmaster@ces.uwex.edu) Last updated November 6, 2002

## Advantages and challenges of data collection methods

Method	Overall purpose	Advantages	Challenges
<b>Questionnaires, surveys, checklists</b>	when need to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non-threatening way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-can complete anonymously</li> <li>-inexpensive to administer</li> <li>-easy to compare and analyze</li> <li>-administer to many people</li> <li>-can get lots of data</li> <li>-many sample questionnaires already exist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-might not get careful feedback</li> <li>-wording can bias client's responses</li> <li>-are impersonal</li> <li>-in surveys, may need sampling expert</li> <li>- doesn't get full story</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews</b>	when want to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-get full range and depth of information</li> <li>-develops relationship with client</li> <li>-can be flexible with client</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-can take much time</li> <li>-can be hard to analyze and compare</li> <li>-can be costly</li> <li>-interviewer can bias client's responses</li> </ul>
<b>Documentation review</b>	when want impression of how program operates without interrupting the program; is from review of applications, finances, memos, minutes, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-get comprehensive and historical information</li> <li>-doesn't interrupt program or client's routine in program</li> <li>-information already exists</li> <li>-few biases about information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-often takes much time</li> <li>-info may be incomplete</li> <li>-need to be quite clear about what looking for</li> <li>-not flexible means to get data; data restricted to what already exists</li> </ul>
<b>Observation</b>	to gather accurate information about how a program actually operates, particularly about processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-view operations of a program as they are actually occurring</li> <li>-can adapt to events as they occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-can be difficult to interpret seen behaviors</li> <li>-can be complex to categorize observations</li> <li>-can influence behaviors of program participants</li> <li>-can be expensive</li> </ul>
<b>Focus groups</b>	explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.; useful in evaluation and marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-quickly and reliably get common impressions</li> <li>-can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time</li> <li>-can convey key information about programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-can be hard to analyze responses</li> <li>-need good facilitator for safety and closure</li> <li>-difficult to schedule 6-8 people together</li> </ul>
<b>Case studies</b>	to fully understand or depict client's experiences in a program, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-fully depicts client's experience in program input, process, and results</li> <li>-powerful means to portray program to outsiders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-usually quite time consuming to collect, organize, and describe</li> <li>-represents depth of information, rather than breadth</li> </ul>

Source: McNamara, C. (1997-2008). Overview of methods to collect information. In *Basic guide to program evaluation*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Management Library. Retrieved February 12, 2007, from [http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl\\_eval.htm#anchor1585345](http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345)