

## Advantages and challenges of different 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)