
FOG for Teams



FOG stands for “Facts”, “Observations” and “Guesses”. This tool is useful for teams who are just kicking off, or who are starting a new cycle with an existing project.

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What it is

This is an activity that uses sticky notes and sharpies and involves an entire team. It is intended to capture everything that the team knows, to assess the knowledge, to determine what needs to be learned, and in what order.

What you get at the end

You will end this activity with a list of top areas that need to be researched in order to make progress with your project.

How to Do It

Step 1. Craft Your Question

Craft a question such as “What do we know about how customers use online banking?” (You want to start with “What do we know about...” and then you’ll want words that capture the area that your project is in. You want this to be narrow enough that it’s not capturing everything that anyone knows about anything, but not too narrow that there are only a few answers. If your question seems too specific, uplevel it until it opens up a bunch of different directions that someone might answer the question.)

Step 2. Invite Your Team.

Invite everyone on the team (extended team, if possible) to a meeting where you can do the FOG exercise together simultaneously. This is not an activity that lends itself to asynchronous collaboration. It can be in-person with sticky notes, or online on a sticky-note tool like Mural. Ask the team members to bring a list of the top things they know about the question. If the question relates to customers, they may want to bring findings from previous customer research.

Step 3. Gather the Team

Get the team together and go over the agenda for the meeting and review your question and the goal for the meeting. Make sure there is a big wall where everyone can use post-it notes to work.

Step 4. Capture

Have everyone capture what they know on sticky notes. One “thing” per note. Each person fills out their own sticky notes. The things they know should be at the level of a highlight (e.g., “40% of Americans are Lonely”, “People use Facebook as a replacement for face-to-face in-person connections”, “Use of phone calls has been falling”, “When I lost my cell phone, I felt really lonely.”). Give everyone a big block of time to capture these, or you can have them prepare this step before Step 3.

Step 5. Post-Up

Have everyone put their sticky notes up on a wall. They can put all of theirs in a cluster, but they shouldn't be overlapping.

Step 6. Rotate and Read

In order to ensure that people are connected to things that other people read, it is useful to have everyone rotate to a cluster of notes that they did not write. Some of these things may be in common with the things they wrote, others may be unique. Everything is okay.

CLARIFY any of the notes that you don't understand with the person who wrote them. Rewrite the notes or add words to clarify.

Step 7. Cluster

Have the team cluster things that seem to go together by moving the sticky notes around the wall. If a note fits into more than one cluster, go ahead and add another note so it exists in each cluster it belongs to.

Step 8. Label

For each cluster, give the cluster a meaningful name that describes the items in the cluster (e.g., "Lost Connections").

Step 9. Remove Duplicates

For each cluster, read through the notes and remove any duplicates physically from the wall. In this exercise, more of the same "thing" is not meaningful. If anyone disagrees that the items are duplicates, be sure to clarify the distinction on the notes that are left on the wall.

Step 10. FOG Labeling¹

For each note, put a letter depending on the type of information the “thing” is:

- F = Fact. Something for which there is hard data behind.
- O = Observation. Something you have personally observed, but which you do not have hard data on.
- G = Guess or Assumption. Something that you assume to be true, but which you haven't directly observed and have no hard data around.

Step 11. Summarize Clusters

For each cluster, count up the number of Facts, Observations and Guesses. Write on the cluster label in the format: #Facts/#Observations/#Guesses

Step 12. Assess Clusters and Prioritize

Read through the clusters and look for categories that have more Guesses than Facts or Observations. For any of them, decide whether this is HIGH priority (meaning, it is something important and you need to have more data and observations), MEDIUM priority (meaning, it is somewhat important and it would be useful to have more data), or LOW priority (meaning that it is less important to the overall project whether you have more data or not). Write the priority on the cluster label. Take the High Priority Clusters/Categories and write the category name on the top of your prioritization list. Read through the clusters that have more Observations than Facts or Guesses. Repeat the prioritization exercise. Take the High Priority Clusters/Categories and put them on the prioritization list underneath the earlier set. Then, put up the Medium priority clusters from both in the order you think is more important to the project.

¹ The origin of the concept of FOG stemmed from an exercise in Straker, D (1997). Rapid Problem Solving with Post-it Notes. I modified it after years of using the method with groups.

Step 13. Planning

You now have a prioritized list of things you need to learn. For each cluster in the prioritized list, brainstorm and select 1-2 ways you can collect hard data to confirm or, better yet, reject the things you know. (The reason to look for hard data that would reject what you know is to counteract the Confirmation Bias - which makes us discount disconfirming data and over-inflate confirming data).