

Focusing the evaluation design

Definition	Planning in advance where the evaluation is headed and what steps will be taken; process is iterative (i.e., it continues until a focused approach is found to answer evaluation questions with methods that stakeholders agree will be useful, feasible, ethical, and accurate); evaluation questions and methods might be adjusted to achieve an optimal match that facilitates use by primary users.
Role	Provides investment in quality; increases the chances that the evaluation will succeed by identifying procedures that are practical, politically viable, and cost-effective; failure to plan thoroughly can be self-defeating, leading to an evaluation that might become impractical or useless; when stakeholders agree on a design focus, it is used throughout the evaluation process to keep the project on track.
Activities	• Meeting with stakeholders to clarify the real intent or purpose of the evaluation; • Learning which persons are in a position to actually use the findings, then orienting the plan to meet their needs; • Understanding how the evaluation results are to be used; • Writing explicit evaluation questions to be answered; • Describing practical methods for sampling, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and judgment; • Preparing a written protocol or agreement that summarizes the evaluation procedures, with clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders; and • Revising parts or all of the evaluation plan when critical circumstances change.

Adapted from a) Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. Program evaluation standards: how to assess evaluations of educational programs. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994; and b) U.S. General Accounting Office. Designing evaluations. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1991; publication no. GAO/PEMD-10.1.4.