

# TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

*The problem:* Not having meaningful and definitive input from volunteers on training topics, content, and formats

*The solution:* Design and apply a needs assessment to query volunteers on training that best suits their needs

A common problem in designing a training is placing too much emphasis on what the organization's "decision makers" think is important and not having a handle on training that best equips volunteers to perform at a high level.

In many cases (and especially with new volunteers), the organization's decision-makers do know best. For example, new volunteers need an overview of the policies (and even laws) that guide their work. In a situation like this, volunteers don't know what they don't know. However, in asking decision-makers to determine all of the training content, you run the risk of including material that the volunteers already know or that does not apply directly to their duties. There's also a risk of excluding some things that volunteers feel will contribute to their successful service.

A training needs assessment is a process of querying your audience on what aspects of a training will benefit them most. It is particularly useful for intermediate and advanced trainings or when volunteers already have a strong background in the field. Here are some basics:

- A needs assessment is not that difficult to put together and implement
- The process can help you create focused and engaging training environments
- Including volunteers' voices in the training-design process helps them feel valued.

The more care you put into the format (questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups) and the design (the questions you ask and how you ask them), the better your needs assessment will be. The better the needs assessment, the more prepared you will be to create a training that builds the knowledge and skills that volunteers need most.

This assignment includes two parts. The first involves asking stakeholders--the organization's decision-makers--about their knowledge of the audience and its training needs. Also, seek their suggestions on the various formats for staging a needs assessment. The second part includes filling in a questionnaire template with questions for your organization's volunteer training audience.

**Step 1.**

Complete the “Asking the Right Questions Before You Write Your Own Questions” form. This form helps focus your organization’s thoughts on the audience and content of an upcoming training. Filling out the form might require collaborating with your supervisor/site mentor or others on your organization’s staff. The data you gathered earlier in the course through your informational interviews and Volunteer Program Inventory might help you in this task.

**Step 2.**

With the data gathered from the “Asking the Right Questions...” form, follow the directions to fill out the “Needs Assessment Template.” The template was designed primarily for questionnaires or surveys. If you determine the best method to conduct a needs assessment is through interviews, observations, or focus groups, you can adapt your work to those formats AFTER completing this assignment.

Since the clarity and wording of the questions will affect the quality of responses, it is best to collaborate with your supervisor/site mentor or others on your organization’s staff before sending your form to volunteers. Keep in mind that a needs assessment is a window for volunteers to see the thinking behind a training and will create expectations of what upcoming trainings will provide.

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU WRITE YOUR QUESTIONS

It's not easy to ask questions of your training audience without first knowing what to ask. This form encourages you to stop and think about what you know already about your audience, as well as the different needs assessment approaches that might be available to you (interviews, observations, focus groups, and questionnaires). It helps you focus on the purpose of the training and gives you a sense of what to ask when you formally query your audience. Consider collaborating with your supervisor/site mentor or others on your organization's staff to complete the form.

### Questions

Who are the learners? (Be as specific as possible.)	
What do (we think) they know already?	
What do we want them to know?	
What do (we think) they want to know?	
What learning is most essential? How will we decide?	
What is the cause of this training need? Will training help?	
What might/will learners do with this training? Are there problems caused by not training?	
What data do we already have about our training audience (past training evaluations, volunteer feedback questionnaires)?	
What types of training environments fit the subject matter (workshops, coursework, in-the-field training, etc.)?	

## Potential Formats

Here are four different approaches for gathering information from your audience on their training needs. The most common and least time-intensive approach is a questionnaire that can be administered in hard copy or online (through a service like Survey Monkey). The format(s) you select depend on what you feel is the best strategy for learning about your audience AND the level of time and effort you can devote to gathering the data. (For this course activity, you are asked to produce a questionnaire.)

Interviews	By whom?
Observations (site visits)	By whom?
Focus groups	By whom?
Questionnaires (paper forms, online [SurveyMonkey, etc.]	By whom?

Adapted from Rossett, A. (1987). Training needs assessment. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Education Technology Publications. Chapter 6, pp. 62-95.

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS SAMPLE

Here is an example of a form completed by a fictional school-based organization.

### Questions

Who are the learners? (Be as specific as possible.)	<i>Mentors and tutors, mostly undergrads with a desire to become teachers.</i>
What do (we think) they know already?	<i>They have a strong sense of the education needs of the student population.</i>
What do we want them to know?	<i>Tutoring and mentoring best practices; how to access support systems.</i>
What do (we think) they want to know?	<i>Strategies for working with specific students: how to reach students across cultures.</i>
What learning is most essential? How will we decide?	<i>We will determine the training content (to supplement best practices and support systems) from the results of the needs assessment questionnaire.</i>
What is the cause of this training need? Will training help?	<i>Volunteers need advanced skills and knowledge. Training is our best option.</i>
What might/will learners do with this training? Are there problems caused by not training?	<i>Volunteers will increase their ability to connect with and assist students. Program might not operate on a high level without well-trained volunteers.</i>
What data do we already have on our training audience (past training evaluations, volunteer feedback questionnaires)?	<i>Feedback questionnaires from orientation; volunteers' educational biography statements.</i>
What types of training environments fit the subject matter (workshops, coursework, in-the-field training, etc.)?	<i>Workshops are our best means to reach all the volunteers at this time.</i>

## Potential Formats

Interviews YES	By whom? VISTA
Observations (site visits) NO	By whom?
Focus groups NO	By whom?
Questionnaires (paper forms, online [SurveyMonkey, etc.]) YES	By whom? VISTA

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE

Once you have a sense of what you'd like to ask your volunteers (from the "Asking the Right Questions..." form), you are ready to create a needs assessment questionnaire for your volunteers to fill out.

When planning to send your needs assessment to volunteers, include **instructions on how to fill out the form** and a **deadline** for your audience to provide its feedback. Make sure to give yourself time to process and summarize the raw data before providing it to stakeholders. (For this course activity, you are only asked to create the form.)

### Step 1.

For the **"forced-choice questions,"** create a set of statements (ideally 3-5) that cover the range of input you are seeking. ("Forced-choice questions" ask respondents to choose from a list of alternatives arranged as a scale.) The quantitative data you generate will help you gauge the volunteers' agreement with the statements. The statements should be phrased from the volunteer's point of view and express his or her comfort level or ability with specific content, skills, and behaviors. (See "Needs Assessment Sample" for examples.) These questions will help you learn trends across a number of volunteers and identify areas where training is needed.

### Step 2.

For the **open-ended questions**, create a set of questions (ideally 3-5) that ask for the volunteers' direct input on training topics and key content needed. You may also want to use this section to query volunteers on their availability for a training and their preferred training format (a workshop, college course, job shadow, internship, etc.). Your questions can be specific or general -- whatever will best suit your needs. Examples of general open-ended questions are included in the "Needs Assessment Sample."

Forced Choice Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Doesn't apply

## **Open-ended questions**

1.

2.

3.

4.

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT “QUESTIONNAIRE” SAMPLE

Dear Volunteer:

We are developing a set of trainings this spring to help build your knowledge and skills. Please take a few moments to fill in this questionnaire to help us design training that best suits your needs.

Please turn in your completed questionnaire to the volunteer program manager by March 31.

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Doesn't apply</b>
I have a strong understanding of our organization's protocol and am able to apply it when working with students.					
I can articulate and apply the responsibilities of being a mandatory reporter.					
I am comfortable communicating with students and parents from outside my own culture.					
I am able to perform at a high level in requesting financial support from donors.					
I am comfortable making public presentations and representing our organization.					
My previous experiences have prepared me to coordinate fundraising events, such as an auction.					

### **Open-ended questions**

1. What training topic(s) would best prepare you for continuing volunteer service with us?
2. From the topic(s) you identified, what do you think are the most important things to cover? What would you most want to take away from a training experience?
3. Is a workshop the best format for this training? Are there other training experiences that would help you perform at a higher level?
4. Do you have scheduling conflicts in May that would prevent you from attending our volunteer training? If so, please let us know the weekend and evening times when you are NOT available.

Thank you!

Adapted from Rossett, A. (1987). Training needs assessment. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Education Technology Publications. Chapter 6, pp. 62-95.