



## Guide to Transcribing and Summarizing Oral Histories

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"All editing constitutes creation of a new text that cannot be viewed as merely a replica of the oral interview. Even the application of punctuation to the verbatim transcript can effect powerful change... the resultant manuscript becomes the primary document."<sup>1</sup> [for researchers]

How we speak is different than how we write. The process of writing allows us to organize and edit our thoughts; speaking, at least conversationally, is a more free-form expression. This can make transcribing an oral history more complicated than a verbatim record of the spoken word, and since transcripts are often the first source researchers turn to, this makes proper transcription vital. Transcription is a balancing act between maintaining the words, character, and tone of an oral history with increasing the clarity and comprehension of the thought behind the words. This guideline will lay out rules and tips to effectively capture the words and meaning of an oral history.

1. Charlton, Thomas L., Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless. Handbook of Oral History. (Lanham, AltaMira Press, 2008), 257.

# TRANSCRIBING ORAL HISTORIES

## The Transcription Process

Transcribing oral histories is often more complicated than copying a person's every word. Everyday speech does not follow the rules of the written word, it contains filler words (uhs, ums, and ahs), and false starts. The audio and video files of most interviews are part of the final document and available if a reader needs a word-for-word clarification, or wishes to hear the tone or study speech patterns. The written transcriptions of the interview serve to create a readable document where maintaining integrity to what a person said is key.

## Writing the Transcript

Transcripts should start with the following information:

- Project name
- Date of interview
- Location of interview
- Interviewee's name and any appropriate affiliation
- Interviewer's name, affiliation, and contact information (email address or phone number)
- List of acronyms (e.g. CW= Cameron Wood (interviewer), KS = Kenneth Schwepes (interviewee), etc.)

Transcriptions are created by listening to the audio and typing what you hear. Changes of speaker should be noted in the transcript with the speaker's initials, followed by a colon (e.g. CW: Where were you born?).

Try to signify pauses and changes in inflections by punctuation. Do not get hung up on attempting to create complete sentences out of what is said. There will be incomplete sentences and run-ons. Err on the side of less punctuation over more. Punctuation in the case of an oral history is only there to increase readability.

Changes in topic should be reflected by separate paragraphs. In general, using more rather than fewer paragraphs will help readers follow the dialogue.

Filler words/sounds, such as "uh," "um," and "ah" should not be included in the transcript.

Do not cut stock phrases like "I think," "kind of," and "you know" and speech quirks particular to the speaker. When speaking an interviewee may repeat a word or phrase to fill space until they decide on their next thought. Maintain the speaker's voice while increasing readability by eliminating all but one of the repetitions. (e.g. KS: "Let me see, let me see, let me see, when I was ten-" becomes, KS: "Let me see, when I was ten-")

Be especially aware of proper names of people and places, as well as dates. Confirm correct spelling and usage whenever possible. A little online research can go a long way to confirming the accuracy of a reference. Remember peoples' memories aren't infallible. If you find a mistake write the correction next to it in brackets. (e.g. KS: My favorite teacher at Harvard was Douglas Frinkbuster [Dinky Frinkbuster]. )

If a section of the oral history is inaudible mark it as [inaudible].

If contractions (e.g. isn't) are used in an oral history, keep them.

Acronyms should be clarified the first time they appear. (e.g. KS: My MOS [Military Operational Specialty] was artillery.)

Brackets [ ] can be used to insert data that wasn't presented in the oral history, but is necessary to understand what is being said. Inserting data should be kept to a minimum, a word or sentence here and there is appropriate while full paragraphs are too much.

The em-dash— is used to denote a pause. (e.g. KS: I was eight— no ten.) It can be used for appositives—where the interviewee inserts a small amount explanatory information—into the middle of a sentence.

The ellipses ... can represent a section of omitted material, or more often where a speaker trails off and does not finish their idea.

Spell out numbers one through nine, above that, use the number.

Italicize the title of books, newspapers, magazines, movies, and TV shows. Italics inside of brackets are also used to represent important non-verbal communications. (e.g. KS: I said, how are you doing? And he gave me the [*thumbs-down*])

For quoted dialogue, always use full quotes ( " " ), and put a comma before the quoted passage, which should begin with a capital letter.

Use phonetic spellings to indicate dialect when used in the oral history. (e.g. "gonna," "gotta," "wanna," etc.)

A false-start is when someone begins to speak, pauses, and then begins the thought over again. Retain false-starts to keep the natural flow intact except when the false start is repeated several times. In that case eliminate all but one of the repetitions.

If profanity remains in the oral history include it in the transcript. The decision to include or exclude material will be made in the video/audio editing process.

## Reviewing the Transcript

When the transcript has been completed it should go through the editing/review process. It is best, whenever possible, to have someone who has never before seen the oral history review the transcript. This person should look for the normal mistakes in spelling and grammar, as it applies to oral histories. But, the primary goal is to make sure that someone who may read the transcript without viewing the oral history still gets a clear and accurate idea of what was communicated. For this the reviewer will need to go through the oral history and check it against the video. Mistakes and inaccuracies can either be fixed directly by the reviewer or a report sent to the transcriber who will make the corrections.

It is preferable that the reviewer have some knowledge of the topic being discussed. This helps confirm the accuracy of the information in the oral history while they are reviewing it.

After the review the transcriber should check the transcript one more time to identify formatting inconsistencies. After that the transcript may be filed or in some cases synced with OHMS [Oral History Metadata Synchroniser]. To learn more about the syncing process please see the instructions on the OHMS website.

### SUMMARY

Directly after the completion of a transcript is the best time to write a short summary of the oral history. The summary should include a brief biography of who is being interviewed, the main subject/theme of the oral history, and a quick summary of topics of significant discussion. The summary should be no longer than half a page.

### REFERENCES

Oliver, Daniel G., J. M. Serovich, and T. L. Mason. *Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription: Towards Reflection in Qualitative Research*. *Social Forces*, vol. 84 (2). December 2005, p.p. 1273–1289. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1400594/>. Accessed March 2018.

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