

Transcription Guide

When you transcribe a tape-recorded interview you are privy to a significant conversation. You are performing a great service by rendering someone's words in an accessible format, and researchers may use your work over many years. Treat a transcript as a document that will be passed down through posterity. Enjoy not just what is said, but also the language patterns that are particular to each speaker.

Transcribe everything

Do not iron out regional dialects or other grammatical forms that sound nonstandard to your ear. Transcribe all of the words spoken in the order in which they were said, even if they don't make sense to you. Do not spell phonetically or convey dialects through your spellings. Always use dictionary spellings. Until we have a linguistic system which can depict everyone's words within the same framework, whether the person is formally educated or not, and regardless of what region they were born in, we will be most respectful by using standard English spellings at all times. For example, if it sounds like someone is saying that they were in the woods hunting for a "bar," type "bear."

It is important to the reader of the transcription to have as much information as you can provide about what transpired during the interview. Pass along the tidbits your ear picks up as you listen, knowing that the person reading the finished transcript won't have the benefit of audible sound. If the speaker laughs, type [laughs]. If you can hear that the tape recorder is turned off and then back on, type [Tape recorder turned off and back on], skip a line, and continue.

You are transcribing for diverse audiences. Those who read your finished transcript may include the person interviewed, family and community members, scholarly researchers preparing their own materials for publication, and documentarians who may want to use portions of the interview for audio or visual productions. Those people using your transcriptions for purposes of scripting documentaries will need every word transcribed verbatim. Exceptions to this are what might be called thinking words like "uh" and "um." But it's important to transcribe expressions such as "uh huh" and "umm hmm" when they represent a positive response to a question or statement, or "ah hah!" when it seems to be said as an exclamation.

The double hyphen --

Most of us speak in interrupted sentences. We start to say something, and then switch directions, or choose other words. Note these with a double hyphen, period, and two spaces. For example, "When I was--. I was about six years old when"

Ellipses . . . or

If, after trying several times, you can't understand a word or a phrase, signify that something is missing by typing space, period, space, period, space, period, space, and then go on to the next word you can hear: (. . .) If a sentence ends or begins in the span of unintelligible words, indicate this with an additional period and space: (. . . .)

Noting tape locations

When you are changing from sides of a tape or to different tapes, note the end of a tape and side and then note the beginning of the next tape and side. This is done by skipping two spaces,

noting the end of the side and tape in square brackets, skipping two spaces, noting the beginning of the side tape and side in square brackets, and then skipping two more spaces. For example,

[End of Tape 1 of 1, Side A, copy 2]

[Beginning of Tape 1 of 1, Side B, copy 2]

First page

You should skip a line between the interviewee's name and the title of the interview, if there is a title. The name and title should be in larger typeface than the rest of the transcript for easy viewing. Then leave a couple of lines before typing "Interviewer: And The Interviewer's Whole Name," and on the next line, "Also Present: And The Name of Anyone Else Who You Know Is In The Room," then the copy 1 (if noted on the tapes) of the tapes, and then skip two lines before beginning to transcribe.

The first time you name someone who speaks on the tape, type his or her full name, colon, two spaces. Afterwards, just two initials, colon, two spaces. "Bob Lewis: Would you start by saying and later, "BL: Did you say that . . . ?"

Punctuating spoken speech is difficult. Just do your best to put periods and other appropriate punctuation where they belong to help with readability and accurately convey what was said. Use exclamation points to indicate emphasis or that someone said something with a laugh in his/her voice.

Type in page numbers somewhere on each page. Type in the date of the interview, at least on the first page. A header or footer on each page is optional. This was a header used:

James Alexander Forrest Sr. --- February 25, 2003

Suggestion

Take frequent breaks so as not to strain yourself by the labor of transcription, which is both intense and time consuming. At least stand up and stretch every ten minutes. Enjoy this intimate visit with someone you may not have met but who is presenting you with an oral testimony. And remember, you are performing a great service to those who are aware of your work and those who will come after. Thank you!

Stylistic notes

you know	need not be transcribed when used as a refrain
umm or hmm	need not be transcribed when this indicates thinking
umm hmm	should be transcribed when it indicates an affirmative - "yes"
ah	should be transcribed when it indicates understanding or realization
yeah	should be transcribed verbatim
--.	indicates an interrupted sentence
--	indicates a false start. Although stammers need not be transcribed, false starts should be transcribed. For example: <i>I though--I was thinking--I though that I should go . . .</i>
. . .	indicates that the transcriber could not hear the word
. . . .	indicates that the transcriber could not hear more than one word
'cause	should be transcribed as <i>because</i>
'til	should be transcribed as <i>until</i>
ain't	should be transcribed verbatim
dates	use numbers if the informant uses numbers. For example: <i>What is your birth date? Four, fourteen, nineteen forty-four.</i> Should be transcribe as <i>4/14/1944</i>
'(date)	use an apostrophe before each year when the century number has been omitted. For example: <i>'98 flood</i> or <i>'33 hurricane</i>