

Transcribing and
summarising oral
history recordings

This sheet will
explain:

- When you should transcribe and when you should summarise.
- How to summarise an interview.
- How to transcribe.
- What equipment you are likely to need.

Centre for Urban History
University of Leicester
Leicester
LE1 7RH

Phone: 0116 252 5065

Fax: 0116 252 5062

Email: emoha@le.ac.uk

www.le.ac.uk/emoha



How do I transcribe oral history recordings?

You've done the interview, turned off the recorder and said good-bye to your interviewee. But it's not all over! In fact, some of the hardest work starts once the interviewing ends.

To make your recordings as useful as possible you will need to **summarise** and, possibly, **transcribe** them. Summaries are brief lists, in order, of the topics discussed and stories told. A quick guide to the interview, they also help you review interviewing techniques, and highlight gaps and vague responses. If you're planning to use the interviews as written speech you'll need to transcribe them, either in full or as extracts (the summary will help you decide which portions of the interview to use).

Summaries

Start work on the summary as soon after the interview as possible, whilst it's still fresh in your mind. As you listen to the recording, note down the key themes and stories, and when certain questions are asked. Write these in order and make a note of the time or counter number in a column on the left of the page—you might want to produce a standardised interview summary worksheet for your project.

Time	Description
00:24	Beer-making at home at harvest time. With siblings, took beer in cans or bottles to fields. Ate lunch under hedge with labourers.
04:10	After school, took can of tea to father in dairy sheds.
05:44	Village mostly arable farming. Father worked on biggest farm. Lots of small-holdings.

Remember!

Make sure the counter or timer is set at zero when you start! (counters on different playback machines run at different speeds but will give a good estimate of where you are in the recording).

Transcribing oral speech into written speech

Face-to-face interviewing is littered with non-verbal communication such as hand, face and body gestures. The original recording is the most accurate reproduction of the interview, minus these non-verbal gestures. However, transcriptions increase accessibility, and together with the recordings and summaries create an important resource for a wide range of purposes – academic research, museum displays, local, family and community history, even television and scriptwriting research.

Turning an oral history recording into written speech is sometimes akin to an act of translation, not just editing. There is no consensus on how to perform the task, but there are some ethical guidelines you should follow.

- Do not correct interviewees' words or grammar—do not change speech patterns.
- Do not change content, intent or put words in the interviewee's mouth.

Time and money



Transcribing can be very time-consuming, varying between 4 to 10 hours transcribing per hour of recorded interview, depending on skill and equipment. If time is short or if you only want to use certain sections, transcribe selected extracts. At the planning stage of the project, be sure to include a realistic amount of time for the task.

Professional transcription is expensive, about £90 per hour of recorded interview. Do you have funding to pay for it? Did you include the costs in your planning? If not, you'll need someone with the time and necessary skills/equipment. Whoever does the job, someone else must go through the text whilst listening to the recording to check for accuracy. And if you are sending the recording away to be transcribed, don't send your original tapes!

Style Guidelines

- You could transcribe every pause, every 'um' and 'ahh' but this makes for clumsy reading. It's probably best to only include those that convey something of the interviewee's speech.
- Nominate one standard dictionary for the project, and set guidelines for spelling so that, for example, regional words are spelled consistently.
- Standardise font, print size, line spacing, paragraphing, use of quotation marks, use of upper and lower case letters, how to indicate years, time and numbers, to abbreviate, and hyphenate words (eg. cooperation/co-operation).
- Place certain recorded activities into square brackets e.g. [laughs], [phone rings].
- Unintelligible parts of the recording? Listen carefully. Get someone else to listen. Type what you think it says and add [??] or add or [unclear].
- Use dashes – for pauses – interruptions – and incomplete sentences.
- Feedback words and sounds such as “uh huh,” “yes” and “hmm”—interviewers use them to engage with the interviewee but can make transcripts tedious to read. Use your judgement when to leave these out.
- Crutch words—e.g. 'uh' after single words in a row. Don't transcribe if it makes reading difficult, unless it is an important part of the narrator's speech pattern.

Equipment

- Transcribing machines with a foot pedal leave your hands free for writing or typing, but an ordinary playback machine with a pause button is adequate.
- Comfortable headphones are a must for lengthy transcribing sessions—the little ones that fit just inside your ears are perhaps best avoided.
- Typing into a word processor will help speed things up.
- And remember—transcribing can be physically demanding. Make sure your equipment and seating is comfortable to use, and take regular breaks.



And Remember

- Head your summaries and transcriptions with relevant identifying names and/or codes, otherwise you won't know which recordings they belong to!
- If other people are to have access to the summaries and transcriptions, make sure you adhere to any restrictions placed on the material by the interviewee (e.g. they may not wish to be identified by name). Do not disclose any other information such as addresses or telephone numbers.
- Offer interviewees the chance to review the relevant summary and transcription. They might be able to clarify names, places, and other information.

Useful website

The Baylor University Institute for Oral History webpage includes a transcribing 'style guide'. It's up to you whether you want to use any of their suggestions.

- http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Workshop_welcome.html