

Transcribing oral histories

A transcript represents in print the words and extraneous sounds present in the recorded interview. The transcriber's goal is to render as close a replica to the actual event as possible.

Why transcribe?

- ◆ Transcripts make the information on the recording easier to locate and assemble for use in media presentations, exhibits, and research publications.
- ◆ Researchers often prefer the ease of looking through a transcript for topics related to their interests over listening to a recording, especially if the recording format is outmoded.
- ◆ New technologies for online digital presentations allow the coordination of sound recordings and transcripts.
- ◆ Narrators still attach prestige to having a print document of their stories.
- ◆ Narrators may preview the draft transcript and provide spellings of proper names and clarification of misunderstood information, resulting in a more accurate account.
- ◆ Transcripts are easily indexed by name and subject.
- ◆ The shelf life of paper far exceeds the brief time a recording format exists before it is replaced by a newer, more advanced format. Even if the medium lasts, the playback equipment does not. Reformatting to new media is expensive.
- ◆ Software is available for transcribing audio on your computer. Foot pedals with USB connections help control playback while transcribing. *Express Scribe* is an open-source, downloadable software available at <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>. The *StartStop Digital Transcription System* is available for purchase from <http://www.startstop.com/>.

Transcribing is worthwhile, but remember . . .

- ◆ transcribing is time-consuming. The approximate time required to transcribe one recorded hour is 10-12 hours, depending upon the quality of the sound recording and complexity of the interview.
- ◆ transcribing is labor-intensive work and therefore expensive. Also, extra administrative costs are involved.
- ◆ a transcript cannot help but distort what is actually on the sound recording—sarcasm may go unnoticed, for example. The unique personality of the narrator is missing no matter how verbatim the transcript. Many oral historians believe that researchers should listen to the recordings themselves, making their own interpretive judgments rather than relying on the transcript.

If you transcribe

- ◆ change as little as possible. The narrator's word choice, including grammar and speech patterns, should be accurately represented. Verbatim renderings of slang and regional pronunciations are the prerogative of each project, but, if used, should be consistent.
- ◆ adopt a standard format for manuscripts. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is recommended. Also, adopt one dictionary for use throughout the project.
- ◆ Many projects use the *Style Guide* furnished online by the Baylor Institute for Oral History at <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23607>.
- ◆ standardize editorial practice and procedure. Allow the narrator to preview the transcript, if feasible, and present her/him a copy of the final, corrected draft.