

# IRENE BOSTON TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

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## DIGITAL AUDIO AND MINIDISC FACILITATION GUIDELINES & RECORDING TIPS

We have a wealth of experience in what works and what doesn't work for digital recordings. These guidelines are divided into **facilitation** advice and more **technical recording tips**, as well as addressing any specific **digital transcription issues**. We hope that this will help clients to make recordings of the highest quality which will, in turn, cut down on transcription times and costs.

Please see our [digital transcription services](#) page for details of the services we offer and our [Equipment](#) pages for further advice .

Many clients have assumed that, because they're using digital equipment, they no longer need to record in a quiet environment or use an external microphone. Somehow digital will magically cut through all that. I'm afraid it won't! Even with digital equipment, you still need to follow the good practice guidelines and common sense listed below to ensure the clearest possible recording.

### FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO...

**Obtain necessary permission** from your interviewees, focus group or meeting participants while setting up the arrangements. Ensure that they're aware they'll be recorded and that the recording will be transcribed. If they suddenly object when you arrive, you may have to abandon it. If it's important to capture on the recording that it's non-attributable and that they give their verbal permission, do so at the beginning. This will protect you from any conflicts in the future and show clearly that you've addressed these issues.

**Brief the transcriber** on exactly what you need to be transcribed - see our [Definitions](#) page. This applies not only to the type of transcript you need, but if you need any housekeeping issues or background included. Provide the transcriber with any **names, places, technical jargon or background material** which may be relevant. This will cut down on transcription time and reduce any issues as to unclear sections of the recording.

Think about the **recording location**. Recording in a **quiet, indoor environment** will ensure the best quality recording. Consider the acoustics of where you'll be sitting. A large room with a high ceiling ('church' like conditions) will produce significant echo which may result in a 'booming' on the recording which could make it difficult to hear, especially if any of the speakers have quiet voices.

**Brief the participants** - with interviews, some people are more seasoned interviewees than others. Some will be understandably nervous about being recorded. As well as briefing them on the content of the interview or the questions you'd like to cover, it would also be helpful to remind them to **speak clearly and not too fast**. If you're recording at their location, ask them to try and **minimise background noise**. You may have to spend some time on arrival asking for radios or televisions to be turned off and doors to be closed.

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### FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO... cont/d.

**Familiarise yourself** with the recording equipment beforehand, especially if you've never used it before. It will be very offputting to interviewees if they see you fiddling with the equipment to try to make it work. Similarly, before you leave, check that the interview has actually recorded.

It may sound obvious but make sure that the **recorder is running** before you start! I've heard horror stories from clients who've spent time, money and effort only to find the recorder wasn't switched on.

**Turn off all mobile phones.** Text messages or voice mails emit a radio frequency which is inaudible to the human ear but the recording equipment will pick it up, and the resulting buzzing noise will drown out whatever is being said at the time. Turning mobile phones to 'silent' or 'vibrate' mode is not enough - they need to be turned off.

**Ensure that all speakers can be heard.** If any speakers have quiet voices, the chances are that the recording will be very poor and difficult to hear. Anyone who mumbles will not be picked up by the recording equipment, however sophisticated it may be. If you can't hear what they're saying, then the chances are that we can't either on the finished recording. Invariably, people don't realise they're speaking softly - we rarely 'hear' our own voices. If they regard taking part in your recording as important enough to set aside time, the chances are that they'll want their contribution heard. Most are happy to **speak up if asked to do so**.

**Be firm** during the recording itself. Although it may be difficult to interrupt anyone for fear of putting them off, if they begin to go off at a tangent, you may have to. If anyone shows you a photograph or a document, it would be a good idea to say what IT is for the recording. Letting them say, 'that is what we used' doesn't make great radio! You may remember what 'that' is at the time but will you later on when it comes to analyse the transcript? And if they just nod or shake their heads, either ask them to say yes or no, or confirm verbally what they've done.

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### FACILITATIONS GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO NOT...

**Record in a noisy environment** such as restaurants, open spaces, airports, pubs, trains, cafes if it can be avoided. Background noise is often more intrusive on recordings than we realise at the time, even with digital equipment. Voices can easily be swamped by extraneous noise, especially if any speakers are softly spoken. If people are talking about what to them are sensitive issues, they'll invariably drop their voice so that anyone nearby can't hear. If they do that, the recorder won't pick them up. Record indoors if you have a choice.

**Leave windows open** - however hot the day may be, try and keep windows closed. Noise from traffic, roadworks and aeroplanes will all impact on your recording. Unless using a noise cancelling microphone, most mics are not as selective as the human ear and can't filter out extraneous noise in the same way we can. They record everything they hear and the loudest noise will dominate.

**Sit near noisy machinery** such as air conditioning, photocopiers, heaters or computers - even radios in the background can dominate a recording and make it impossible to hear.

**Have crockery near the microphone.** It's tempting to have tea or coffee to relax any participants. Try and have this away from the recording area. If not, the clattering of the crockery will be the loudest sound on the recording, resulting in the voices being almost impossible to hear.

**Shuffle papers** near the microphone. As this may be the source of the nearest noise, that is what the microphone will hear and it will drown out whatever is being said. If you need to refer to a list of questions, it may be worthwhile either having them on one side of A4, or on cards for ease of reference.

**Write near the microphone** if you can avoid it. We have often heard recordings where the scribbling of a pen is the loudest sound throughout the recording!

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### RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO...

**Use recording equipment that is fit for purpose** - if you're reading this page, we can only hope that we're preaching to the converted! Digital recordings produce an excellent sound quality which will cut down on transcription time, minimise the number of inaudibles and reduce costs. If you need convincing further, please read our [comparison](#) between digital and analogue recordings.

**Choose an uncompressed digital setting** - most digital recorders offer recording settings ranging from SHQ (stereo high quality) down to LP (long play). SHQ produces the largest file size but the best quality. HQ is a good compromise but LP produces the poorest quality. Don't compromise on quality just to save memory space. Use the **highest uncompressed quality level your recorder offers** - issues over file size and length of time to transmit the digital files are trivial compared to the production of a good quality recording. You can probably get away with a lower quality for dictation, but will need the highest quality for multiple participant interviews, conferences or focus groups or meetings.

**Decide on a suitable digital audio level** - 8,000kHz should be suitable for dictation. 44,100kHz is the highest end of the range and produces exceptional recordings but there is a trade off in larger file sizes.

**Digital file compatibility** - check that the digital file format you are using is compatible with digital transcription software, or that it can be converted into a useable format. Digital transcription software will only transcribe from certain digital file formats, so it's vital to ensure you choose a format that can be transcribed. We discuss the pros and cons of the more common file types such as wav, dss, mp3 and wma [here](#).

**Test your equipment** before any recording to check that there are no technical problems with your equipment. If you can't plug your recorder into the mains and are reliant on batteries, ensure that you have a spare set with you, or a battery charger for rechargeables. Ensure that you have sufficient memory cards with you.

**Test the sound levels** - use headphones to check the recording levels. Ask any interviewee or focus group participant to introduce themselves - what you hear through the headphones is a fair indication of what the transcriber will hear. If it's too faint, move the microphone nearer the subjects - this is especially relevant if anyone has a quiet voice. Once you can hear their voice clearly, we probably can too. Most digital recorders will set the **recording level** automatically, although on some, you can change this setting. This can be useful if you have a speaker with a quiet voice or dominant background noise.

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### RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO... cont/d.

**Use an external microphone** - this is essential even with digital recorders. Most built-in microphones are of poor quality with limited control over volume levels. Remember that microphones will pick up sound from the nearest source, which is often the recording equipment. Using a good quality, external compatible microphone will greatly enhance the quality of the recording leading to a subsequent reduction in transcription time. We discuss [microphones](#) in more detail on our [Equipment](#) pages.

**Place the microphone near the speakers** - it may be tempting to sit close to the recorder to check it's working, but if your subject is too far from the microphone, then the clarity of the recording will suffer. All too often, we receive recordings where the interviewer's is the clearest voice and everyone else is inaudible, either because they have quiet voices or because the mic is too far away. Since the answers are presumably more important than the questions, please ensure that the **microphone is as close as possible to the speaker**, or at least central between you and the subjects. For multiple speakers, we recommend using **one microphone for every 1 to 2 people**. For multiple microphones, you'll need a **mixer** to connect all the microphones to your recorder.

### RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO NOT...

**Choose the lowest recording quality level** on your digital recorder just to save memory space. Please **do not compress** the files as you make the recording. Although this may result in large size files, taking extra time to transmit the files to the transcriber or finding extra memory space are trivial issues compared to achieving a superior quality recording. Choose the highest quality level available on your recorder.

**Use the time-stamp bleep.** Some recorders come with an option to insert a bleep at intervals. Please turn this off! Each time the recorder inserts a bleep, it will drown out any voices and will result in an incomplete transcript. Our transcribers are experienced in inserting time stamps where required without electronic help.

**Use voice activation.** If you use recorders with a voice activation feature and the speaker is too far away from the microphone or speaks softly, this may not be picked up by the equipment. We've found that some recorders are not very sensitive and will sometimes switch off in mid-sentence if the sound level goes below the minimum pick up threshold, especially with softly spoken speakers. Please turn this feature off!

These guidelines relate to **digital recordings**. Please refer to our [Guidelines](#) pages for other recording situations. If you have any questions relating to digital recording and transcription, please contact us on 01485 543746 or [Boston@ibss.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:Boston@ibss.fsnet.co.uk) we would be happy to help.