

# IRENE BOSTON TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

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## FOCUS GROUPS / MEETINGS / FORUMS / ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS FACILITATION GUIDELINES & RECORDING TIPS

We have a wealth of experience in what works and what doesn't work for recordings of focus groups, forums and meetings.

These guidelines are divided into **facilitation advice** for moderators to more **technical recording tips**, as well as addressing any specific **focus group transcription issues**. We hope that this will help our clients to make recordings of the highest quality which will, in turn, cut down on transcription times and costs.

Please see our [focus groups/forums](#) and [meetings transcription services](#) pages for details of the services we offer and our [Equipment](#) pages for further advice .

### FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO...

(divided into **before**, **during** and **after** for ease of reference)

#### Before the focus group:

Think about the **recording location**. Recording in a quiet environment will ensure the best quality recording. If possible, choose a professional venue which will be able to provide a soundproof room. If you're providing the room yourself but hiring professionals to record the event, think carefully about the **acoustics of the room** itself. A large room with a high ceiling ('church' like conditions) and no carpet will produce significant echo which your ear will be able to filter out but the microphone won't. It will result in a 'booming' on the recording which could make the participants difficult to hear, especially if any have quiet voices.

**Seek professional help** - when there are multiple speakers in large rooms, the ideal solution is to use microphones connected to professional recording equipment via a direct feed. If you're using a venue specialising in hosting group meetings, they'll have their own in-house recording facilities or specialist technicians available who can advise you on the best recording option. **DON'T** skimp on this essential step - it will be a false economy. If the meeting venue offers either option, **choose digital** for recording rather than analogue.

**Obtain necessary permission** from your focus group participants or forum members while arranging up the event. Ensure that they are aware they'll be recorded and that the recording will be transcribed. If they suddenly object on arrival, you may have to abandon the recording.

**Transcription issues** - decide on the **type of transcript** you require - see our [Definitions](#) page for details of the tailored transcript style we've developed specifically for [focus groups](#). Do you wish any **housekeeping** or briefing issues to be transcribed? Is it essential that **each speaker is identified**? This will greatly increase the costs, particularly with a large group and add to the transcription time - it's cheaper without the speakers identified.

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

Ensure that you choose an effective and **experienced moderator** or facilitator to chair the group. This is as vital as the choice of venue and recording equipment. An inexperienced or ineffectual moderator will be overrun by a boisterous group and all their valuable contributions will be lost. A facilitator who can control a focus group, forum or roundtable discussion effectively will make an enormous difference to how much of what is said can be heard on the recording and, therefore, transcribed.

Hold a **rehearsal** in the meeting room before the event, if possible. Use colleagues to replicate the number of participants if possible. Use this situation to **test the recording equipment**, check on sound levels, the best microphone positions and to identify any background noise problems. Listen to this test recording through headphones - this is what the transcriber will hear. If you can't hear the voices, we won't either.

### During the focus group:

**Brief the participants** - reiterate the purpose of the focus group or discussion and run through any background material before you begin recording, unless you specifically need this to be transcribed. For example, you may want to prove that you did brief participants thoroughly and explained that their contributions were non-attributable, or to record that they gave their permission to be recorded.

**Lay down a few ground rules firmly.** Remind all participants not to talk over each other or their contributions will not be captured. Don't be afraid to remind them of this again during the discussion, if people become passionate or excited and start talking at once.

**Minimise background noise** wherever possible, whether this is chairs scraping, background chatter, or noisy machinery such as air conditioning.

**Provide refreshments before** or after the discussion if possible. It's tempting to have tea or coffee on the table to relax the participants but, if you can, confine any refreshments to break times. If there is cutlery or crockery on the table, the clattering will be the loudest sound on the recording.

**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.

**Conduct introductions** - if each speaker needs to be identified on the transcript, ask **each participant to introduce themselves** and perhaps describe where they live and work. This will help the transcriber to 'tune in' to a particular voice, and may enhance the chances of recognising that voice later on in the recording. If the focus group involves many participants, ask each person to state their name every time they make a comment. If a person introduces themselves at the beginning, but then doesn't say anything for an hour, it's unlikely the transcriber will be able to remember

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

what that earlier voice sounds like or be able to identify its owner. Alternatively, ask the moderator to thank each participant by name after every lengthy contribution - this will give the transcriber clues as the focus group progresses.

**Make a speaker voice brief** - if introductions aren't made at the beginning but you still need each speaker to be identified in the transcript, it's essential that you make notes as the focus group progresses to give the transcriber a clue as to which voice belongs to which name. Not every voice will be sufficiently different as to make it obvious who's speaking.

**Please remember that the transcriber will never have heard these voices before**, so it's impossible to ascribe a name to voice without help. You'll need to give as many clues as possible on accents, description of voices (clear voice, quiet, talks in coherent sentences, rambles, any verbal quirks). This is particularly useful if some participants share the same first name.

**A place map can also be helpful** - if you log where each person sits, the transcriber may then be able to work out which voice sounds nearer to the microphone, or is coming from the left or right through their stereo headphones.

**Ensure that participants sit in the same places** after refreshment breaks. If they move about, this will render any 'place map' useless. After a while, any experienced transcriber will have begun to 'learn' where certain voices are coming from and letting everyone move around confuses the issue. If it's necessary to have people in different groups or mixings halfway through, you'll have to ask them all to reintroduce themselves if you want the voices identified on the transcript, or you'll have to prepare a second place map.

**Ensure that the participants can be heard.** A participant who has a quiet voice or mumbles won't be picked up by the recording equipment, however sophisticated it may be. If you can't hear what's being said, the chances are we can't either on the finished recording. Although it may be difficult to interrupt or risk putting someone off, you have to be firm or you'll lose valuable material.

**Ask them to speak up and repeat anything you don't hear clearly.** Invariably, people don't realise they're speaking softly - we rarely 'hear' our own voices. If they regard taking part in a focus group 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** if you're chairing a focus group. As tempting as it may be to let the discussion ebb and flow and to interrupt as little as possible, it's important to achieve a balance between intimidating the participants so that they barely contribute and allowing it to descend into mayhem. People in groups tend to talk over each other, often at a fast pace and particularly if they become animated or angry about what they're discussing. If this happens, **ask everyone to speak clearly and individually or they won't be heard.** Don't be afraid to ask participants to shut up if necessary!

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

If there's a participant who's very loud and dominant, that's all the recording equipment will hear. You might as well do a one-to-one interview with them for all you'll capture of the other participants, especially if the latter are softly spoken or timid.

**Moderators can tailor their approach depending on what they want to achieve from the group and the type of participants they have.** Telling company directors not to talk over each other may not go down too well! But asking individuals giving feedback about a product to repeat what they've said so that it can be heard tends to be a bit easier. It's also important not to let the main discussion go off on a tangent - you'll be losing valuable focus group time.

**Assist in clarification** - if materials such as marketing presentations, adverts, photographs, or new product information are being shown to focus group participants, **remember that they may need to be identified on the transcript.** So it would be a good idea to say what the 'IT' is that's being shown. Letting a participant say, 'that is better than that' doesn't make great radio! You may remember what 'that' is at the time but will you later on when it comes to analysing the transcript? And if participants just nod or shake their heads, either ask them to say yes or no, or confirm verbally what they've done.

### After the focus group:

**Brief the transcriber** on exactly what you need transcribed. If participants need to be identified, ensure that you provide a list of names with companies, job titles or any other relevant information. Ensure that you include the speaker voice brief you made during the recording. Without it, the transcriber can't match names to voices.

### FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO NOT...

**Record in a noisy environment** - background noise is often more intrusive on recordings than we realise at the time. Voices can easily be swamped by extraneous noise, especially when participants are softly spoken. If people talk about sensitive issues, they invariably drop their voices which makes it doubly difficult for the recorder to pick them up.

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

**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 by either you or the meeting participants.

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

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### RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO...

**Use recording equipment that is fit for purpose** - we would urge all clients to **use digital recordings**. They produce an excellent sound quality which will cut down on transcription time, minimise the number of inaudibles and reduce costs. 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 and file type** - 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. Ensure you choose a digital file type which is compatible with transcription software. We discuss the pros and cons of the more common file types such as wav, dss, mp3 and wma [here](#).

**Use external microphones** - most built-in microphones are of poor quality with limited control over volume levels. Using a good quality, external microphone will greatly enhance the quality of the recording.

As there are likely to be many speakers for a focus group, ensure there are a **sufficient number of microphones** around the room to pick up ALL the participants clearly. Do **NOT** try and cope with one microphone in the middle of a large table. We recommend using a minimum of **one microphone for every 2 people** and you'll need a **mixer** to connect all the microphones to your recorder.

We discuss [microphones](#) in more detail on our [Equipment](#) pages.

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

**Use standard audio tapes** for focus groups. They have been superceded largely by digital, either minidisc or digital audio sound files which produce a far better recording.

**Use mini tapes or micro-cassettes for anything other than dictation.** These are designed to be used with one voice only using a dictaphone held very close to the mouth. If that same equipment is used on a table between speakers, the resulting recording will be very poor and, coupled with background noise, virtually inaudible.

**Use a portable recorder** with an internal microphone. This will be virtually useless for picking up multiple voices. All it will record is the noise nearest the recorder, which may be a participant coughing or scraping their chair, or even the recorder itself! None of that will produce a recording that's possible to transcribe. We've encountered our fair share of focus group recordings done on the 'cheap' and the recording is virtually unusable.

**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!

**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 resulting in an incomplete transcript. Our transcribers are experienced in inserting time stamps where required without electronic help.

**Send copies of audio tapes** - if, despite all the above, audio tapes have been used, please ensure that you send **only** original tapes to the transcriber. Originals will always be clearer than copies, regardless of the quality of the copying equipment, and transcribing from a copy will increase transcription time and costs. Digital files don't degrade when copied - all analogue media does.

These guidelines relate to **focus groups, forums, meetings or roundtable discussions**. Please see our additional [Guidelines](#) pages for any other recording situation.

If you have any questions relating to focus group transcription not covered on this page, please contact us on 01485 543746 or [Boston@ibss.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:Boston@ibss.fsnet.co.uk) and we would be happy to help.