

IRENE BOSTON TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW PROJECTS FACILITATION GUIDELINES & RECORDING TIPS

We have a wealth of experience in what works and what doesn't work when conducting and recording oral history interviews. These guidelines are divided into **facilitation advice** and more **technical recording tips**, as well as addressing any specific **oral history 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 [oral history transcription services](#) page for details of the services we offer and our [Equipment](#) pages for further advice.

FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO...

Obtain necessary permissions from your interviewees while arranging the interviews. Ensure that they're aware they'll be recorded and that the recording will be transcribed. Not everyone will be comfortable with the thought of being recorded, so if they suddenly object when you arrive, you may have to abandon the recording. If it's important to capture on the recording that the interview is non-attributable or that the interviewee gives their verbal permission for the interview to be recorded, do so at the beginning. This will protect you from any conflicts in the future and show clearly that you have addressed these issues.

Brief the transcriber on exactly what you need to be transcribed - see our [Definitions](#) page for clarification on the type of transcript available. We can provide a transcript style tailored to [oral history interviews](#). Please be clear whether you need any housekeeping issues or background about the project transcribed. Or conduct such explanations before switching on the recorder. After the interview, provide the transcriber with a **list of questions** if the interviews follow a semi-structured format. This will cut down on transcription time or reduce any issues over unclear sections of the recording. Decide if you want your questions to be typed in shortened format and only the interviewee's responses in full.

Think about the **interview location**. Recording in a quiet, indoor environment ensures the best quality of sound recording. If possible, choose the location yourself as your interviewee may not be aware how background noise can impact on your recording. They may feel more comfortable in their own home with the television on or outside in a busy environment but that will interfere with the clarity of the recording.

Consider the acoustics of where you'll be sitting. A large room with a high ceiling ('church' like conditions) produces significant echo which will result in a 'booming' on the recording which could make the interview difficult to hear, especially if the interviewee has a quiet voice.

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

Brief the interviewee before the interview. If it proves impossible to select the interview location yourself, it's advisable to try and gently steer them towards choosing a **quiet room** with the **minimum background noise**. Or, if it's being held in their house, spend a few minutes before the interview asking for things such as the television or radio to be switched off, or noisy children or animals to be 'removed'. We realise this is a delicate situation and you don't want to be seen to 'take over' their home but if you want to stand a chance of capturing what they're saying, you may have to be diplomatic but firm! Some people will be understandably nervous about being recorded so you may need to spend some time putting them at their ease.

Familiarise yourself with the recording equipment, especially if you've never used it before. It will be very offputting to the interviewee to see you fiddling with the equipment to try to make it work. Similarly, before you leave, check the interview has recorded. It may sound obvious but make sure that the **recorder is running** before you start the interview! We've heard horror stories from clients who've spent time conducting an interview 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 your 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 the interviewee can be heard. A speaker with a quiet voice or who mumbles will not be picked up by the recording equipment, however sophisticated it might be. If you can't hear what they're saying, then the chances are we can't either on the finished recording. **Ask interviewees to speak up or repeat anything** you don't hear clearly. We've often received recordings where the interviewee is speaking barely above a whisper and the interviewer was afraid to interrupt. Invariably, people don't realise they're speaking softly - we rarely 'hear' our own voices. If they regard taking part in an oral history interview as important enough to set aside time, the chances are they'll want their contribution heard. Most are happy to speak up if asked to do so.

Be firm with the interviewee during the interview itself. Although it may be difficult to interrupt for fear of putting them off, if they begin to go off at a tangent, you may have to.

Assist with clarification. If the interviewee shows you something, be it a photograph or documents, it would be a good idea to say what it is for the recording. Letting the interviewee just say, 'that is where we lived' 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 they just nod or shake their heads, either ask them to say yes or no, or confirm verbally what they've done. **Ask the interviewee to spell out any names, places or complex terminology**, either at the time or at the end, if you don't want to interrupt the flow of the interview.

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FACILITATION 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. Voices can easily be swamped by extraneous noise, especially when people are softly spoken. If interviewees are talking about what to them are sensitive issues, they'll invariably drop their voices so anyone nearby can't hear what they're saying. If they do, the recorder won't pick them up.
Record indoors if you have a choice.

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 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 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 the interviewee, or the interviewee may offer refreshments and it's easy to have this on the table where the recorder also sits. If you do, the clattering of the crockery will be the loudest sound on the recording, which will result in the voices being almost impossible to hear.

Speak over your interviewee. In a more conversational type interview, it can be tempting to interject comments during the interview. In normal conversation, we tend to say 'yeah' or 'right' or 'okay' on a regular basis, if only to indicate to the other person that we're actually listening to them. It may be hard but try and break yourself of this habit because **your interjections may drown out what the interviewee is saying.** What's more important - that you capture what they're saying or your ramblings?!

Shuffle papers near the microphone. As this may be the source of the nearest noise, that's what the microphone will hear and it will drown out whatever is being said by either you or the interviewee. If you need to refer to a list of questions, it may be worthwhile either having them on one side of A4, if possible, 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 we hear throughout the recording! Keep the microphone near your interviewee not near you.

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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](#).

Test your equipment before any interview - record something before you set off to check there are no technical problems with your equipment. If you can't plug your recorder into the mains and are reliant on batteries, ensure you have a spare set with you, or a charger for rechargeables and enough memory cards for digital recorders.

Test the sound levels - use headphones to check the recording levels at the beginning of the interview. Ask the interviewee 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 interviewee - this is especially relevant if the interviewee 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.

Use an external microphone - 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 leading to a subsequent reduction in transcription time. Lapel or tie-clip microphones pick up voices very clearly, but be careful they don't also pick up rustling clothing. Noise cancelling microphones can cut down on a certain amount of ambient noise, or use an omni-directional microphone but that can pick up sound from every direction. We discuss the differences between external and internal microphones in more detail on our [Equipment](#) pages.

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

Place the microphone near the speaker or speakers. It may be tempting for the interviewer to sit close to the recorder to check it's working, but if the interviewee is too far from the microphone, the clarity of the recording will suffer. All too often, we receive recordings where the interviewer is the clearest voice and the interviewee inaudible. Since the answers are almost always more important than the questions, please ensure that the **microphone is as close as possible to the speaker**, or at least central between the interviewer and interviewee, or use lapel or tie-clip microphones.

RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO NOT...

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

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 drowns out any voices and will result in an incomplete transcript. Our transcribers are experienced in inserting time stamps where required without electronic help.

Send copies of audio tapes - if you still need to use an analogue tape recorder, please ensure that **only** original audio tapes are sent. Originals will always be clearer than copies, regardless of the quality of the copying equipment. Transcribing from a copy will increase transcription time and your costs. Digital files do not degrade when copied - all analogue media does.

Use a slow recording speed - some analogue recorders can be used at slower speeds. This extends recording time and saves on the number of tapes used. However, there is a consequential loss in recording quality and an increase in the amount of background hiss. We would recommend that you use only the **fastest speed setting** on your recording equipment. Tapes are comparatively cheap, so why save on tape costs when those savings will be swallowed up by the extra transcribing time and costs?

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. There is also a slight time delay between someone speaking and the recorder starting up again, so the beginnings of sentences are often chopped off.

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These guidelines relate to **oral history projects** and **transcription of interviews** with one or, at most, two interviewee participants. If you are conducting a panel type interview with more than three interviewees, or recording interviews over the phone, please refer to our [Meetings](#) and [Teleconference Guidelines](#). Please use the above links for guidelines designed for any other recording situation.

If you have any questions relating to oral history interview transcription and recording not covered on this page, please contact us on 01485 543746 or Boston@ibss.fsnet.co.uk and we would be happy to help.