

IRENE BOSTON TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

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AUDIO TAPES (including mini tapes and micro cassettes) FACILITATION GUIDELINES & RECORDING TIPS

We have a wealth of experience in what works and what doesn't work when recording on audio tapes. These guidelines are divided into **facilitation advice** and more **technical recording tips**, as well as addressing any specific **audio tape 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 [audio tape](#), [mini tape](#) and [micro cassette transcription service](#) pages for details of the services we offer and our [Equipment](#) pages for further advice.

FACILITATION GUIDELINES - PLEASE DO...

Obtain necessary permissions - whatever situation you are recording, whether it be interviews or focus groups, ensure that your participants are aware they'll be recorded and that the recording will be transcribed. If they object when you arrive, you may have to abandon the recording. If it's important to capture on the recording that the recording is non-attributable or that the participants give their verbal agreement 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. Please indicate if you need any housekeeping issues or background transcribed. Provide the transcriber with a **list of questions** for any interviews or focus groups. This will cut down on transcription time or reduce any issues over unclear sections of the recording. Decide if you want questions to be typed in shortened format and only the responses in full.

Think about the **recording location**. Recording in a quiet, indoor environment ensures the best quality of sound recording. For interviews, if possible, choose the location yourself. **Consider the acoustics of where you'll be recording**. A large room with a high ceiling ('church' like conditions) will produce significant echo, resulting in a 'booming' on the recording which could make the recording difficult to hear, especially if anyone has a quiet voice.

Brief the participants beforehand. Some people are seasoned 'campaigners' but some will be understandably nervous about being recorded. As well as briefing them on the content of the recording, it would also be helpful to remind them to **speak clearly and not too fast**.

If you're recording in an interviewee's home, ask them to choose a quiet room with the **minimum background noise**. Or you may have to 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!

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

Familiarise yourself with the recording equipment, especially if you've never used it before. It will be very offputting to your subjects 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! I've heard horror stories from clients who've conducted 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 speakers can be heard. A speaker who has 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 speakers to speak up or to 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 the recording 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 participants. Refer to the [focus group](#) pages for advice specifically aimed at multiple participant recordings. For interviews, although it may be difficult to interrupt the interviewee 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 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 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 that's unclear, 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 - especially with analogue recordings. Voices can easily be swamped by extraneous noise, particularly when speakers are softly spoken. If people are talking about what to them are sensitive issues, they'll invariably drop their voice so anyone nearby can't hear what they're saying. If they do, the recorder will not 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 that 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 on the table where the recorder also sits. If you do, the clattering of the crockery will be the loudest sound on the recording.

Speak over your subject. Especially 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 still provide transcription services for clients using audio tape recordings but would urge all clients to consider switching to **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.

Use only brand name tapes - using cheap tapes is a false economy. Inferior quality tapes are more prone to breakages or 'jumping' and will produce a poor recording which takes longer to transcribe and costs more. Please only use brand name tapes such as Philips, Sanyo, Sony, Fuji, Maxell, Olympus or TDK. C60 tapes are less prone to breaking and stretching than C90s. Ensure that you have enough spare tapes with you.

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.

Test the sound levels - use headphones to check the recording levels at the beginning of the interview. 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 - especially if the interviewee has a quiet voice. Once you can hear their voice clearly, we probably can too.

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 costs. Lapel or tie-clip microphones pick up voices very clearly, but can also pick up rustling clothing. Noise cancelling microphones can reduce background ambient noise. We discuss the differences between external and internal microphones in more detail on our [Equipment](#) pages.

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, then 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**, or at least central between the interviewer and interviewee, or use a lapel or tie-clip microphone.

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RECORDING TIPS - PLEASE DO NOT...

Use mini tapes or micro-cassettes for anything other than dictation. These are designed for one voice using a dictaphone held very close to the mouth, and 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 and tape hiss, virtually inaudible. The **equipment is being asked to record a situation for which it was never designed.** For interview situations, the only analogue system which will provide an adequate recording is one using standard audio tapes.

Use a slow recording speed - some 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 using only the **fastest speed setting** on your recorder. 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.

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.

Send copies of audio tapes - original audio tapes will always be clearer than copies, regardless of the quality of the copying equipment. To ensure greater accuracy, please ensure that **only** original tapes are sent. Transcribing from a copy increases transcription time and your costs. Digital files do not degrade when copied - all analogue media does.

These guidelines relate to audio tape transcription and recording for mostly interviews and small meetings. 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, including [dictation](#).

If you have any questions relating to audio tape 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.