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The Art of Oral History Transcription

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INTRODUCTION: THE ART OF TRANSCRIPTION

While the practice of oral history requires many pieces of modern technology, it remains an art crafted on the interaction between living, breathing individuals. Modern historians continue to confront older controversies in their profession, such as the elusive quest for "objectivity" and the reliance on the written word as "truth revealed."

Frederick Stielow, a prominent oral historian, recounted that this emphasis on written evidence often led historians to destroy early oral history recordings after transcribers placed the words on paper. By placing an emphasis on the transcript as final product rather than on the interview as an alternative primary source, early oral history interviews often resembled "oral" discussions that served as an appendix to the written memoirs of prominent politicians. As late as the 1960s, tapes were commonly erased after historians produced transcripts.

Inexpensive audiocassette recorders, followed by more recent innovations in video and multimedia computer technologies, have redefined the field of oral history. Researchers--living within a print-dominant culture--continue to place greater faith in the words read from a transcribed interview instead of the actual voices recorded during the session. However, the same innovations that broadened the practice of oral history by folklorists, urban anthropologists, sociologists, and advocates of "nearby history" could shape the future role of written transcripts.

TO TRANSCRIBE OR NOT TO TRANSCRIBE

Willa K. Baum, a pioneer in local oral history research, has summarized the issues one must consider before transcribing an oral history interview:

The Pros:

1. Written transcripts provide greater flexibility: A written document requires no additional media, whereas an audiocassette or videocassette require a machine in order to interact with the interview. Researchers may skim a transcript at a much faster pace than they can fast-forward through a recording.
2. Corrected transcripts provide greater accuracy: During the actual interview, participants may make grammatical or logical errors in their responses. Inaudible voices on poor recordings can come alive on a written transcript. A corrected proof allows the reader to view comments or additional information that may clarify statements made during the interview.
3. Transcripts provide a tangible product for the organization: In general, people feel more comfortable with written documentation.

Although oral history as a practice has received some criticism because it relies on a spontaneous verbal interview, the presence of a written transcript may pacify researchers who would rather read words than hear voices.

The Cons:

1. Transcribing interviews is time and cost extensive: Depending on the speed and accuracy of the transcriber, the organization should budget a six-to-twelve hour commitment for every single hour of recording. And this will provide only a rough draft! The length of time required to transcribe depends upon the skills of the transcriber, the conditions of the recording, and the presence of background noise during the actual event. Foreign accents, fast speakers, complicated delivery or language, or poor narration will significantly slow the transcription process. In addition, the group must plan second (and often third) readings to verify that the written document accurately indicates both what was said and what was intended. Even if the organization secures volunteer labor, it must expect a substantial time and expenditure outlay.

2. The interviewee must have an opportunity to review the transcript: If an organization transcribes an interview, it has an ethical obligation to share a draft with the interviewee and interviewer before researchers may have access to same. This action will allow all participants an opportunity to clarify any discrepancies or ambiguities that occurred during the session. Always give the interviewer and interviewee photocopies of the transcript; retain the original for security purposes. In reality, the tape must be viewed as the primary source, with the transcript acting as a secondary interpretation of the interview. Inferences made by the transcriber do change the nature of the source!

IF YOU DO TRANSCRIBE

When members of an oral history team choose to transcribe interviews, they have a variety of important decisions to make. Some key issues to consider:

1. Use a computer, rather than a typewriter: Prior to the 1980s, transcripts of interviews appeared either as written notes (and often in shorthand, if use was limited to the originator) or as typed pages. While both of these methods provided instant access to the information obtained during the interview, the advent of personal computers has revolutionized the craft of oral history.

2. Select a computer system with a strong track record and a promising future: Although technology changes rapidly, a few computer models have stood the test of time and should remain prominent in the coming years. Apple's Macintosh and the many IBM-

compatible models offer a variety of software titles and the promise of future upgrades. For the most part, earlier Macintosh systems (SE-30, etc.) and IBM compatibles (XT, 286, 386, etc.) can perform many of the functions of the newer, faster models. Older and discontinued models pose two substantial problems: Incompatible computer software may prevent the transfer of files to newer machines and damaged computer hardware may be difficult--if not impossible--to replace. Examples of older models include Apple II and Apple IIe, Commodore units (Vic-20, C-64, C-128, Amiga), Coleco Adam, Tandy non-IBM machines (TRS-80), Atari, Texas Instruments, and Franklin ACE, to name a few. Also, avoid mainframe computer terminals (virtual machines, UNIX systems) because of their susceptibility to system malfunctions and the possibility that system operators might remove software from the shared environment.

3. Obtain commonly used software that provides flexibility: Oral historians employ technology that assists them; therefore, they should acquire software that requires little effort to use, as well as programs that provide the benefits of portability (transferable between computers) and longevity (has potential for future upgrades and manufacturer support). Examples of such software include: WordPerfect, WordStar, OfficeWriter, Microsoft Word, and Works. Consult software reviews and examine manuals before performing transcriptions. Save text files frequently to avoid the frustration (if not outright anger) one encounters when a brief power outage deletes hours of work from the computer's memory.

4. Select audio/visual equipment carefully: While a variety of special tape recorders and other media equipment exist, budgetary constraints often limit the hardware resources available to those with the difficult task of transcription. Larger historical societies, universities, and archives often possess tape recorders with start/stop foot pedals and very sensitive play/rewind/fast forward buttons. Dictaphones are also commonly used. However, tape recorders (even the most expensive models) are not generally equipped for frequent start/stop/rewind/replay exercises, and they do tend to require frequent maintenance and repair. If the organization owns only an audiocassette recorder, it should use cassette tapes in the 30-to-60 minute range, because longer tapes (90 and 120 minutes) have a thinner composition and tend to damage the machine or tear due to the start/stop motions of the machine. The proliferation of videocassette recorders offers a promising alternative for societies that videotape interviews. Generally, manufacturers of VCRs equip their machines with the capability of freeze framing, and reverse and forward scanning. The video image may also allow the transcriber to place annotations in the text that record images and actions not portrayed by an audio recording. For example, if an interviewee recalls a traumatic period in his or her life, the wiping of a teary eye may be noticeable on the video, but forgotten by the time the audiotape is transcribed. If an organization produces both audio and video recordings, the videotape could provide the source for transcription, whereas the

audiotape might offer a quick way to check and correct the typed draft.

5. Always transcribe from a COPY, not the ORIGINAL: If, during the course of the transcription, an audio or video tape becomes damaged in the machine, the entire contents may be destroyed. At best, the transcriber might have to splice the tape, and thereby forever lose some important parts of the dialogue. Never place the original interview in a machine during transcription session, or even for regular play back. The master version of an oral history interview should only be used when the oral historian must make a copy; at all other times, the original recording should remain in a secure climate and humidity controlled area.

SKILLS REQUIRED BY THE TRANSCRIBER

Willa Baum correctly argues that a "sharp mind" is much more important than "good typing" ability. At best, a written transcript symbolizes one person's interpretation of another person's thoughts and meanings. Prerequisite skills of a transcriber include:

A. Broad, general background in "common knowledge." For example, if an interviewee talks about his childhood during the New Deal years and continually praises "that wonderful President Teddy Roosevelt," the transcriber should be aware of this important ahistorical discrepancy.

B. A core knowledge in the field under discussion. For a local oral history program, transcribers should have an awareness of local geographical regions, a knowledge of key names and phrases, and some sense of the region's history.

C. Strong grammatical and spelling skills. Punctuation used in the interview should express the intention of the speaker. If the interviewer asks a question, the text should include a question mark; if the interviewee shouts a reply, an exclamation mark should add emphasis to the words on the paper. Similarly, punctuation may indicate delays in the verbal exchange ("After the Great Depression we went to . . . let's see . . . we went to Chicago.")

D. An understanding of the context. Whenever possible, the transcriber should be present at the actual interview session and therefore have a first-hand acquaintance with all of the parties involved in the interview. This will give the transcriber an advantage when he or she hears a word on the tape that could have a variety of meanings or spellings, depending on the context. (Someone with a strong accent might pronounce "tamper" or "temper," but mean "Tampa.") Also, participants in an oral history interview often make false starts when asking or answering questions, and the

transcriber must decide whether to include an incomplete sentence or thought or whether such a statement should be discarded. A transcriber may get the context for part of an interview by listening to a few minutes before transcribing line-by-line. This preview will allow the transcriber to discern the flow of the interview, as well as comprehend when unnecessary verbiage ("uh," "you know," "right?") and chit-chat can be removed or clarified. The transcriber should also note unintelligible words or silent periods on the tape ("Tape silent for 5 seconds, unintelligible"). The transcriber must remember that written and oral language provide two different systems of interaction. The tone used in pronouncing a word during an interview may convey a multiplicity of meanings that no single transcriber can adequately describe.

E. Retain the exchange and the spontaneity. An oral history session is a verbal transmission of ideas between two or more individuals. Some transcribers make the mistake of removing the comments and questions of the interviewer, with the false belief that the interviewees words alone will provide a sufficient context for researchers. Always include the interviewer's words so that future generations will have a complete dialogue rather than a partial monologue. In addition, discourage interviewers and interviewees from attempting to alter the context of the session by "cleaning up" the script. The presence of an "ain't" will not discredit the intellectual ability of the speaker; replacing "I agree" with "I concur wholeheartedly" takes away the lively character of the talk: Remember that an oral history interview should never resemble a scholarly monograph (unless the speakers talked in such a fashion at the time of the interview!!!).

INDEXING AND ABSTRACTING: CREATING A MASTER BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX

The presence of a written transcript provides the oral historian with an opportunity to offer greater indexing and abstracting of interviews. Shareware and commercial software programs are available that allow indexing of names, subjects, geographic locations, themes, and other keywords by working in conjunction with the word processor. If such software is not readily available, the historian may mark a photocopy of the final transcript with index keywords and create a manual index. Be sure that the keywords selected have a lasting value to future users. For example, an index might include "Carter, Jimmy" if the interviewee mentions specific details of Carter's presidency, public life, or private activities. However, a simple statement such as "I remember that Carter won the 1976 election" requires no indexing, because it fails to offer any relevant details about Carter's life.

Indexing may also occur on the transcript. To provide greater access to the verbal recording, the transcriber may choose to play

the tape of the interview, and mark on the transcript the point of the interview at a given time interval (every 30 seconds or 1 minute). Use a stopwatch or accurate timepiece.

THE FUTURE OF TRANSCRIPTION

Advances in computer technology may simplify the cumbersome task of transcription. Sound recognition software, now in its infancy, may soon allow oral historians to plug a tape recorder into a personal computer, play the tape, and run a software program that translates sounds into words. Actually, television stations have used voice recognition technology as early as the 1970s to provide closed captioning for hearing impaired viewers. Regardless of technological developments, a human ear will always be required to assure that transcripts offer an accurate reflection of the verbal nuances expressed during an interview session.

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