

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Transcript Format and Style Guide for Transcribers, Auditors and Editors

Getting Started

- Transcribers should follow these guidelines. Auditors should double-check them. Editors should ensure that the final document adheres to these guidelines consistently.
- We model our guidelines on *The Chicago Manual of Style* (whatever the most recent edition is)

1. Open and Save File

Name the file: Lastname_Firstname_date

2. Session Heading

Begin the transcript document with names of the interviewee, interviewer, transcriber, etc., on the left side; the collection number, tape number, session number (in roman numerals), and date of the interview on the right side. All items in the heading should be in bold:

Interviewee: **Cecil Taylor**

Interviewer: **Pamela Dean**

Transcriber: *[enter your name if transcribing]*

Session I

October 15, 1991

You will need to create a separate document for each **session** of the interview. A session is an actual meeting of the interviewer and the interviewee on the same date. A long session sometimes goes on to a second tape, but the session remains the same. However, if the interviewer and the interviewee take a break and then resume their interview on a different day, they have begun a new session. In this case, you will need to create a new document with its own its own file name and its own session heading (the tape #, session # and date will change).

Separate sessions on different dates should not be on the same tape or audio file. If they are, the tape or audio file can be split accordingly and numbered to indicate the separation. (e.g., if two sessions are on Tape 1823, the tape/recording can be split into Session I on Tape 1823.1, and Session II on Tape 1823.2)

3. Line Spacing

After the session header at the top of page one and the bracketed tape information that you will insert just below it (see Step 6 below), transcripts are double-spaced. Transcripts have standard tabs and one-inch margins. Always use Times New Roman 12 point font.

4. Names

Type the interviewer's and the interviewee's full names the first time they speak in the transcript. Afterwards, use just their last names. Use all capital letters, bold font, and follow the name with a colon and a tab:

GWYNETH A. MYERS: Good morning.

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HORATIO MORRISON: Good morning to you, Mrs. Myers.

MYERS: Are you ready to begin?

MORRISON: Yes. Let's start.

Note that there is always blank space between speakers. This helps readers better distinguish who is speaking. In a double-spaced transcript, the space between speakers will be larger than in the example above.

Occasionally during an interview a person will speak and you won't know who it is. This might happen, for example, if someone interrupts to tell the interviewee that he has a phone call. In that case, if you cannot get a name for the speaker, identify them as "unknown" like this:

UNKNOWN: You have an important phone call.

5. Timestamps

Almost all the files you work with will be digital files that will require time stamping. **Time stamps should appear at least once per page** and are in real time. The timestamp should be followed by two spaces before the text starts.

BARROW: [1:14] Well, it's a pleasure to have you with us, Dr. Soderbergh.

Also put a timestamp at the end of the interview, below the last line of text, above the notation that indicates the end of the tape:

SODERBERGH: Thanks for coming today. I'm going to turn this recorder off.

[1:04:19]

[End Tape 82, Side B. End Session I.]

6. Finishing Up

When you are done transcribing, be sure to review the entire transcript using spell check!

In the Text

1. What to Transcribe, and How to Transcribe It

You should always strive to make the transcript as close to verbatim as possible. We want to present what the interviewee said, just as he or she said it. It is sometimes difficult to translate speech into written words, so please look over the examples below to guide you.

- Transcribing verbatim does not mean that you must include every single sound that an interviewee utters. For example, you do not need to transcribe "ah" "er" "um" or other similar sounds:

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SMITH: Well, ah, I graduated from high school in, ah, 1934 and then graduated from college in 1938, er, I mean 1939.

Can be transcribed as:

SMITH: Well, I graduated from high school in 1934 and then graduated from college in 1938, I mean, 1939.

- Sometimes, a speaker will repeatedly use a short phrase like “you know” or “you see” while he or she is speaking. When transcribing, you should include these phrases. If these phrases are so constantly used that they affect the flow of the dialogue, the editor may remove some of them from the final transcript.
- Likewise, if a speaker stutters, it is not necessary to transcribe every repetition of every sound:

PORKY: Th-th-th-th-th that’s all folks!

Can be written as:

PORKY: That’s all folks!

2. Standard Spelling

Use standard spelling. Do not try to reproduce accents or dialects. If you are unsure of a word, try looking it up in the dictionary.

You may use “yeah” “ain’t” and “y’all.”

If someone agrees by saying “um-hm” or “uh-huh” type “yes”

If someone disagrees by saying “uh-uh” or “nah-uh” type “no”

Gonna	should be typed as	going to
Gotta	should be typed as	got to
Did ‘em	should be typed as	did them
Nothin’	should be typed as	nothing
Cause	should be typed as	because

3. Grammatical and Other Similar “Errors”

- You may be “correcting” a speaker’s pronunciation by using standard spelling, but do not try to impose standard grammar on those who do not use it. Transcripts should reflect the speaker’s usage, including word choice and order.

Examples:

“So, I’m down there at the store to get me some of that there ostrich sausage.”

“We didn’t know what we was doing!”

- Speakers may also sometimes use words that are not “real” words. If you can transcribe these in a way that makes sense, do it. You do not need to correct the speaker

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Examples:

“They sort of caretaked us while we were growing up.”

(caretaked is not a word but it makes sense in this context)

“He showed a real versatality in the way he danced.”

(The speaker might mean “versatility” or “vitality”)

“He wasn’t a very strong swimmer and he drowned in the river one day”

(The word is “drowned”, but if the speaker adds the extra syllable, you can too)

- If a speaker trails off in the middle of a word, you usually don’t need to transcribe the portion of the incomplete word.

Example:

If the speaker starts to say “disability” but doesn’t get the whole word out:

“I wasn’t working because I was on disa . . . I got hurt at work then went on disability.”

You can transcribe as

“I wasn’t working because I was on . . . I got hurt at work then went on disability.”

4. Sounds

When someone laughs, type the word “laughs” in brackets, as in:

MYERS: I guess you were pretty popular in school! [laughs]

MORRISON: [laughs] I guess so.

When relevant, briefly note other non-verbal sounds in brackets, as in:

MORRISON: So, as I was saying . . . [telephone rings] I’d better get that.

If the speaker is making a sound effect, you can type it like this:

AMMON: I could hear the bilge pump going *thunk thunk thunk thunk*.

Do not overdo it. You don’t need to note every time someone coughs or a dog barks unless it seems relevant to the narration **or** if it is loud enough to startle you while you’re listening.

5. Using Ellipses

An ellipsis is three periods that are separated from the text and from each other by one space
In a sentence, an ellipsis looks . . . like that.

An ellipsis may be used in a transcript to:

- indicate when a speaker trails off before finishing a thought or sentence
- indicate a pause

Here are some examples on how to use ellipses in different instances:

Example 1

JONES: Well, my father gave me that name because . . . My dad was a character, you see.

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JONES: The color of my bike was . . . I loved this bike.

In these examples, the speaker trails off on his first incomplete thought, indicated by the ellipsis. He then continues speaking with a new complete thought. When an ellipsis is used between an incomplete sentence and a new complete sentence like this, the new sentence begins with a capital letter.

Example 2:

JONES: I had a bike that was . . . blue.

JONES: My dad was a . . . character.

In these examples, the speaker pauses while he is completing his thought. When an ellipsis indicates a pause within one sentence like this, the continuation of the sentence does not begin with a capital letter.

Example 3:

SMITH: I got married and my last name is now Smith so . . .

HEBERT: What year did you get married?

In this example, the speaker does not complete her thought. The ellipsis is used at the end of the thought that trails off.

Example 4:

SCHORR: I was Air Force ROTC and each semester you . . .

RAMIREZ: Okay.

SCHORR: . . . were in it like a basic cadet. You were in a company which was in a squadron.

In this example, the speaker is interrupted by another speaker in mid-sentence. The ellipsis is used to end the first part of his thought, and to begin the second part of his thought.

6. Breaks in the tape

Sometimes interviewees will ask that the recording be stopped temporarily because they want to talk about something off the record. If the recording is stopped in such a way that it interrupts the narration, type “break in tape” in brackets, like so:

MYERS: Do you know who killed the ostrich?

MORRISON: Yes, but first turn that . . . [break in tape] The police never found that out. I’m the only one who knows. And you too, I guess. Now you know. But I don’t want that on tape.

Other times the tape is stopped because the phone will ring, or someone will enter the room, etc. Sometimes the sound of the recorder being turned off and on is loud so you can note a break in tape in these situations as well.

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MORRISON: The ostrich was . . . The phone's ringing. Let me . . . [Break in tape]

MYERS: You were about to tell me about the ostrich.

Once again, only use this mark if it seems relevant to the narration. We can't always tell when an interviewer has stopped recording a tape and started it again. However, readers can often recognize places where a conversation has been interrupted. Give them the [break in tape] as a clue, if it seems necessary.

7. When You Can't Understand

When you can't understand a word, listen to it again three times.

If you still can't understand it, type a question mark in brackets, like so:

"I don't know about the kitchen and [?], but you should see the living room."

When you can't understand a few words, type an ellipsis and a question mark in brackets, like so:

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“I don’t know about [. . . ?], but you should see the living room.”

Sometimes you think you know what the speaker says, but you’re not sure. You can use brackets and a question mark to indicate your uncertainty of a single word, or string or words. This lets the auditor and editor know to pay special attention to that segment of the transcript.

Examples:

For a single word:

If you think you heard “boudoir” type this:

“I don’t know about the [boudoir?], but you should see the living room.”

For a string of words:

If you think you heard “about the boudoir” type this:

“I don’t know [about the boudoir?], but you should see the living room.”

If tape static, a faulty microphone, background noise or another unsolvable problem makes it impossible to understand the speakers over a sizable portion of the recording, note the problem in the text like this:

For a tape, use counter numbers: [inaudible 047 to 085]

For digital audio, use time stamps: [inaudible 2:49 to 3:10]

8. Spelling of Proper Names

Sometimes a speaker will mention a person’s name that you can’t understand or aren’t familiar with. When you are not sure about the spelling of a name, type a question mark in brackets after the name or word:

“Mr. Guthridge[?] was my piano teacher.”

If the interviewee is kind enough to spell out a name or any other word, type it in all capital letters like this:

“Mr. Guthridge, G-U-T-H-R-I-D-G-E, was my piano teacher.”

Sometimes, you will have a list of proper names and uncommon words prepared by the interviewer. This list may be found in the transmittal or control folder and you should refer to it for spelling help.

If there is no list:

Try an Internet search using Google. You would be surprised what you can turn up!

Other Resources:

State politicians the list of governors and members of congress in the *Louisiana Almanac*.

LSU instructors and administrators: old copies of the general catalog

LSU alumni: old copies of the Gumbo

Authors: Middleton Library’s LOLA or *Books in Print*

Names of towns and cities: Our office’s Louisiana map and U.S. road atlas

For historical figures, names of non-U.S. towns and cities, and names of colleges and universities, look in the special lists in the back of our *Webster’s Dictionary*.

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For French or Cajun words, look in our French-English dictionary or our Cajun-English dictionary.

Common Capitalization Rules

Titles of books are capitalized and put in *italics*. The same goes for plays, operas, films, record albums, magazines, newspapers and other long pieces of work.

My favorite film is *Sixteen Candles* and my favorite book is *Animal Farm*.

The titles of stories, songs, articles and other short works are capitalized and put in quotation marks.

Nick Cave sang his song "From Here to Eternity" when we saw him in concert last week.

Note that when we capitalize titles, we do not capitalize prepositions or conjunctions or modifiers such as "a" or "the" unless they begin the title:

I read Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

He was working on a story he called "Stuck in the Middle."

Departments of a university, college, government or other organization are capitalized when using their official titles:

I study at the College of Education at LSU.

However, departments or subjects are not capitalized when not using their official titles:

I study education at LSU.

Exceptions to this rule are for languages and nations, which are, as usual, capitalized:

I am studying English literature, but I think I will major in Russian history.

Do not capitalize the name of a department if it is not used in a specific sense:

Someday, I will be the dean of a college of education at a major university

He was in the army. (You would capitalize United States Army)

Titles of administrators are capitalized when using their official titles:

Peter Soderbergh, Dean of the College of Education, delivered a speech.

But administrative titles are not capitalized when they are not used as official or specific titles:

Peter Soderbergh was dean for several years in the College of Education at LSU.

Once again, administrative titles are capitalized when they are combined with the administrator's name as a sort of personal title, as in:

I talked to Dean Soderbergh about his job at LSU.

This holds true for political or military titles as well:

Everyone respected General Middleton.

I support President Obama's plan.

But, when capitalizing personal titles, remember the rule about titles used in a general sense:

General Middleton was everything you would expect a general to be.

They said President Bush was not always a popular president.

It even holds true for family titles:

I always said that Mom was the best mom in the world. My mom is a terrific lady.

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I got a letter from my Uncle Zeke in which my uncle said, “The farm just isn’t the same without you.”

Apostrophes

We use apostrophes to mark a missing letter or letters in a contraction:

“don’t” for “do not”

“you’d” for “you would”

We also use apostrophes to show the possessive:

Jim’s car.

When the name of the person or thing in possessing something ends in an “s,” current style dictates we should add an apostrophe and an “s”:

Thomas’s car.

The most common exception to the rules for apostrophes involves the word “it.” Because this word and its variants are so common, we need to make a special exception for it. It’s just one of those things you have to know.

“It’s” is short for “It is” as in **It’s going to be a hot day.**

“Its” is the possessive sense of “It” as in **The car lost its hubcaps.**

One more time:

It’s so hot in that car you could fry an egg on its dashboard.

Quotations

The transcript format clearly shows when the interviewer or the interviewee is speaking, so quotation marks are not necessary. But when the interviewee or interviewer is quoting someone else, use quotation marks:

MORRISON: My father said, “Son, I want you to be a dentist.”

(Note the period goes after the word dentist and before the close-quotation mark.)

This style also applies to sentences in which the interviewee is quoting him or herself:

MORRISON: I said, “Dad, I don’t want to be a dentist.”

When the sentence does not end with the quotation, use a comma in place of a period and continue the sentence after the close-quotation mark:

MORRISON: “Son, I want you to be a dentist,” my father said.

(Note that the comma comes before the close-quotation mark.)

When the narrator quotes someone quoting someone else, set off this quote-within-a-quote with single apostrophes instead of the usual double-apostrophe quotation marks.

MORRISON: My father said, “You know your grandfather said, ‘That boy would make a fine dentist.’ You don’t want to let down you grandfather, do you?” I said, “No, sir.”

Sometimes, especially in quotes, a narrator will speak in such a way that you will need to use a question mark or exclamation point before the end of a sentence to indicate the tone.

MORRISON: I said to her, “I flunked my final exam.” “You did?” she said.

MORRISON: I said to her, “I flunked my final exam.” “You better not have!” she said.

In this case, treat the question mark or exclamation point as a comma and continue the sentence

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without using a capital letter.

Numbers and Numerals

The Chicago Manual of Style has an exhaustive breakdown on when to use numbers and when to use numerals.

Its basic rules are to spell out:

Whole numbers from one through ninety-nine (one, ten, twenty-one, ninety-nine)

Any of these numbers followed by hundred, thousand, million, etc. (one million, three thousand)

Any number which begins a sentence (Nineteen ninety-four was a great year.)

We can usually use numerals for any other use of a number in the transcript.

The fifty-five horses pulled 10,435 pounds of equipment.

Ed McMahon says I won ten million dollars!

When I was eleven years old, I inherited forty-four hundred baseball cards from my uncle.

I had a 3.35 grade point average in the fourth grade.

Three thousand, five hundred fifty-two ostriches invaded the state capitol today.

Nineteen thousand five hundred forty-three dollars is a lot of money.

Years and Dates

When a narrator is speaking about years, we can use numerals as long as the numbers don't begin the sentence:

MORRISON: I was born in 1927.

If the numbers begin the sentence, we must spell them out:

MORRISON: Nineteen twenty-seven was the year I was born.

We can also use numerals when the narrator abbreviates a year. Type an apostrophe in front of the year in place of the missing "19" or other century numerals:

MORRISON: I moved to Chicago in 1937 or '38.

Or even:

MORRISON: I moved to Chicago in 1937 or '8.

When the narrator is referring to a decade, we can use text:

MORRISON: I went to college in the forties and again in the fifties.

Note that the decades are not capitalized.

Or numerals:

MORRISON: I went to college in the '40s and again in the '50s.

Type an apostrophe before the first numeral in place of the "19" or other century. Type an "s" directly after the decade numerals and do not put another apostrophe before the "s"

Once again, though, do not use the numerals to begin a sentence:

MYERS: When did you get your Ph.D.?

MORRISON: Fifties. I got my master's in the late '40s and my doctorate in the late '50s.

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Dates of the month

Spell out dates of the month, because they are always less than ninety-nine.

MORRISON: I was born on December seventh, 1927.

When a speaker gives the month and year without the date, we do not need to use a comma:

MORRISON: I was born in December 1927.

Spell out words such as third, fourth, fifth, etc. Do not use numerals and “rd” or “th” with these words.

Sometimes a speaker will state his birthdate as simply numbers. In that case, write it like this.

MORRISON: I was born on 12/7/1927

Miscellaneous

“Capital” and “capitol” are two different words. “Capital” means chief, head or accumulated wealth. A “capitol” is a building in which a legislative body meets. When referring to a specific, building, you should capitalize capitol:

Investors want lower taxes for capital gains.

Baton Rouge is the capital city of Louisiana.

I work on the third floor of the Capitol Building in Baton Rouge.

It is the tallest state capitol in the country.