

## Basic Rules of Transcription

The real trick to a good transcription is to wrap your head around the notion that the transcript is a *written* representation of the spoken word or conversation, and should observe to every possible extent the rules of writing while also capturing the flow of the spoken word. While creating a readable transcript is as much about common sense as it is about hard and fast rules, there are a few guidelines to observe. Note: these guidelines are for both transcribing and auditing (checking for accuracy) a transcript.

1. Each speaker should be identified by their name in caps. Use both their first and last names when they first speak, then use their last name only every time the speaker changes.
2. Refrain from transcribing false starts, "um" and "uh," repetitions, "until I -- until I went to..." and similar devices common in spoken conversation but that can look ridiculous, and make the speaker look ridiculous, in writing. Filler can happen in-between phrases too, not just at the beginning of a sentence or phrase. If you're auditing a transcript, remove the offending devices so that the transcript reads more smoothly.
3. Unless there are great outbursts of joyful laughter that really deserve acknowledgement in writing or are recognized in subsequent conversation, e.g., "that was really funny," refrain from transcribing laughter, e.g., "(Laughter)". It's also not necessary to transcribe coughs, sneezes, and the like unless they become a topic of conversation, e.g., "My that sounds like a bad cough you have -- may I offer you a lozenge?"
4. Use parentheses for editorial comment, such as (indiscernible), not brackets as you would otherwise -- in 99.9% of cases, parentheses will be fine since in spoken conversation parenthetical remarks aren't used (allowing .1% for theatrical asides here). This is for reasons of timecoding, which may happen downstream in the workflow and can rely on brackets as a coding device. If the transcription agency used brackets [indiscernible] change it to (indiscernible) - but only for audio that cannot be understood.
5. Listen closely to discern what's being said. Use your brain and your Google. "My mother grew up in the (indiscernible) part of Union County, Georgia" upon further review was not indiscernible, nor was it the phonetic "Choy Stoy," but was, in fact, Choestoe, a place name that could be of great interest to researchers. The bottom line is that good transcription can require a little heavy lifting and mystery solving.
6. Transcribe/audit words fully, don't try to capture accents or common but improper contractions of words. This is particularly the case with phrases like "gonna" -- use "going to" instead -- and gerunds/present participles (ending in -ing). Make sure you add the "g," even if you're sure the speaker said "I was screamin' and hollerin' the blues" (although if you were to interview Charlie Patton posthumously, we could maybe make allowances for this). This is to preserve the dignity of the speaker (some DO care about how what they say looks on paper, so playing it appropriately safe we like to assume EVERYONE cares). Now, with all this said, normal and accepted contractions (can't, shouldn't, they're, etc.) are fine and should be transcribed as such, and in some cases you will have to make a judgment call where the line is blurry. For instance, if the interviewee is quoting a folksy conversation he or she had, or overheard, or was told about, using vernacular is fine. Also, non-words like "ain't" can be descriptive of a narrator's approach to a story or accurately reflect the way they speak, and in many cases do not need to be replaced with their formal counterparts.
7. With consideration to Rule 6, do not otherwise correct for grammar. Correcting for grammar has the potential to deviate significantly from the actual audio recording.

8. We like the venerable em-dash as a way to separate text in places where a comma is not enough, a colon is too much, and a semi-colon doesn't make any sense. Remember, though, an em-dash in the electronic world is two dashes with a space on either side (" -- "). Note: some word-processing software combines two dashes into one long one - that's OK too.
9. It doesn't matter whether you choose to use a single or double space following periods and colons. Modern journalism and typesetting has changed the playing field here, and we can always do some find and replacing in Word if we need to change it. What DOES matter is using your chosen method consistently through the document, as this has a big effect on how easy it is to reformat the document later on for timecoding purposes.
10. Avoid paragraph breaks – these are ultimately interpretive, and rather than take time deciding whether or not they are appropriate, it's simpler to make a break only when identifying the change in speaker.
11. Consult the Chicago Manual of Style for questions regarding capitalization.
12. Make at least two passes when auditing (checking for accuracy) a transcript:
  - On your initial pass, you can do a scan of the text without listening to the audio, checking the spelling of all person and place names of which you are not certain. If you're not willing to bet your life on it, check the spelling. Speed in transcription does no one any good if all the names are misspelled and places misidentified.
  - Listen to the audio on the second pass. On this pass your job is to ensure that what was said was accurately transcribed, keeping in mind the other rules outlined here. Again, watch for false starts and filler, and remember that you serve both the narrator and the researcher.