Guide to Transcribing and Summarizing Oral Histories
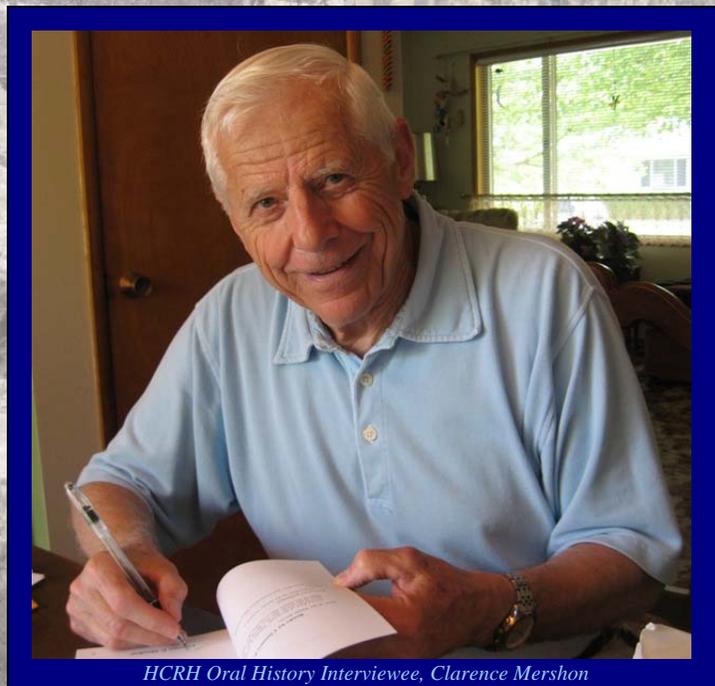
HISTORIC COLUMBIA RIVER HIGHWAY ORAL HISTORY

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RESEARCH

Guide to Transcribing and Summarizing Oral Histories

Historic Columbia River Highway Oral History Project

by: the Oregon Department of Transportation Research Section
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Because how we speak can be very different from how we write, transcribing interviews is often more complicated than copying a person's words down verbatim. Thus, this document includes tips for transcribing oral history interviews and provides guidance for editing and formatting. Also included, is general guidance for writing interview summaries, where the goal of the summaries is to inform the state of understanding, while maintaining the intent and integrity of the interviewee. Overall, this document is designed to provide guidance in transcribing and summarizing oral histories within the context of the Oregon Department of Transportation's Oral History project.

CONTENTS

TRANSCRIBING ORAL HISTORIES

The Transcription Process

The transcript serves as the written record of the oral history interview. Transcribing oral histories is often more complicated than copying a person's every word. Everyday speech includes irregular grammar, filler words (uhs, ums, and ahs), and false starts. For the Oral History Report, the audio files of the interview are part of the final report and available if a reader needs a word for word clarification. The written transcriptions of the interview serve to create a readable document where maintaining integrity to what a person said takes precedence over ensuring every word makes the page.

On average, the transcription process takes 4-6 hours per hour of recorded interview.

Writing the Transcript

Transcripts should follow a standard format and always include the following information:

- Interviewee's name and contact information (email address or phone number)
- Interviewer's name, affiliation, and contact information (email address or phone number)
- Date of interview
- Location of interview
- List of acronyms (e.g. AP = Amanda Pietz (interviewer), JS = Jon Smith (interviewee), etc.)

Transcriptions are created by listening to the audio file and typing what you hear. Each change of speaker should be noted in the transcript. The speaker is identified by their initials, followed by a colon (e.g. AP: Where were you born?). When typing the transcript signify pauses and inflections by punctuation. Changes in topic should be reflected by separate paragraphs. In general, using more rather than fewer paragraphs will help readers follow the dialogue.

Filler words, such as "uh," "um," and "ah" should not be included in the transcript. For example, the following dialogue:

> AP: You mentioned that you worked on, well, on the construction of the Bonneville Dam?
>
> JS: Um, yes, I think it was ah, my senior year in high school, ah or no, um it was both my senior and junior years in high school.

could be changed to:

> AP: You mentioned that you worked on the construction of the Bonneville Dam?
>
> JS: Yes, I think it was my senior and junior years in high school.

Editing the Transcript

Transcribing an interview is an iterative process. Once the initial account is compiled, the transcript should be reviewed and clarified.

When editing the transcript, always add the following information:

- Editor's name
- Date of edit

Editing may be considered as a phased process, such as the one described below.

First Pass

This first pass through the transcript is done while listening to the audio version and correcting the document. This pass includes:

- catching and fixing transcription errors—wrong or missing words and phrases
- trying to identify inaudible passages
- making basic spelling and punctuation corrections

Second Pass

This pass corrects names and facts and makes global fixes wherever possible. It includes:

- correcting names in the transcript, noting the whole name at first appearance
- global fixes of capitalization, formatting, removing extra spaces and the like
- making a list of inaudible passages and name queries

Third Pass

This is the creative editing pass. Free from worry about facts, the editor can look at the bigger picture:

- ensuring flow
- eliminating repetition
- cutting stock phrases like "I think," "kind of," and "you know" and speech quirks particular to the speaker
- fixing remaining grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors
- breaking up run-on sentences and too-long paragraphs
- making small changes for clarity
- smoothing syntax

If corrections of grammatical errors are made, they need to be done for all speakers, including the interviewer(s) and the interviewee(s).

WRITING INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

Purpose and Goal

Collecting oral histories is a research endeavor, where the purpose is to collect primary data through recollections. Because interviews are unpredictable, in that they are not scripted, the information collected may or may not be relevant to the topic or provide added or new understanding to the body of knowledge. Thus, "summaries" are created in an effort to highlight the information most relevant to the topic and that which helps to enhance the historical record.

Writing a Summary

The goal of the summary is to capture the main points of the interview in 1-2 pages. The summary should focus on the content that is relevant to the research, and provide a well rounded context for that content.

A note on context: In anthropological research, context is very important; it helps to preserve the true sentiments of a person, as opposed to highlighting a statement to fit an agenda, such as making something sound good, bad, or funny, when it was not the intent of the speaker.

When including quotations, statements which are interesting, fun, and humorous can be included as long as they contribute to the research, and as long as they can be included tastefully (i.e. not at the expense of demeaning the interviewee). Also, when including quotations, the passages used should be reviewed, as best as possible, for accuracy. Because interviewees provide their memories, recollections, and opinions, the information provided can sometimes be conflicting or historically inaccurate. While a disclaimer about oral history data is provided for the entire report, caution should be taken not to directly quote information that is known to be inaccurate.

For the summary as a whole, below is a list of some useful tips:

- Read the original text carefully, jotting down notes or highlighting important points.

- Arrange your information in a logical order, for example, chronologically.

- As you revise and edit your summary, compare it to the original and ask yourself questions such as:
  - Have I rephrased the interviewee's words without changing their meaning?
  - Is there any additional information I could include that would help clarify the context?

- Consider whether things that may be politically sensitive are appropriate in the summary. The entire interview will be included in the report, and therefore there is no need to highlight something unless it is necessary to the meaning of the research.

HELPFUL FORMATTING AND GRAMMAR TIPS

Formatting and Punctuation

Below are style definitions and tips for appropriateness and use. For questions specifically related to:

- Adding information not mentioned, but needed for clarification, see BRACKETS
- Noting an interruption during the interview, see DASHES
- Omitting information, see ELLIPSES

Abbreviations
Use periods for abbreviations, such as D.C. and U.S. The times "A.M." and "P.M." should be in small caps (e.g. 8 A.M.).

Acronyms
Acronyms have no periods. They should be spelled out in the first instance, using brackets to set off the full name.

>   Example:
>   "I worked for ODOT [Oregon Department of Transportation] from 1990 to 2009."

Brackets
In transcriptions, and quotations, brackets are typically used to include information not specifically mentioned (such as a full acronym name, a non-verbal occurrence, a proper name, to signify an inaudible passage, or to add clarification).

>   Example:
>   "She [my sister] was the one who practically raised me."

Commas
According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, commas are used to indicate small interruptions in continuity of thought or sentence structure. Your ear is the best judge for determining comma placement.

Contractions
Contractions are more common in speech than text, but are equally valid. They add informality and help reproduce "real speech" (e.g. "it's" is less formal than "it is"). When contractions are used in the interview, they should be transcribed as such.

Dashes
The em-dash (—) is used to signify an interruption.

> Example:
> AP: Did you read the transcript? I feel it's—
> JS: Sorry to interrupt.

Also use a dash to indicate a change of course mid-sentence, and enclose the thought in dashes if the sentence veers again or goes back to its original course.

Dates
No apostrophe is needed when indicating plural years (e.g. 1980s, or '80s).

Ellipses
An ellipsis is three dots, each separated by a space (. . .). Ellipses are used to express an omission. But note that an em–dash (—) should be used for interruptions and/or for trailing off (see under DASHES).

In the middle of a sentence use a space before and after the ellipsis. At the end of a sentence use four dots total. The first is the period (without a preceding space), followed by three dots. Each of the four dots is followed by a space.

Money
For specific amounts, use the dollar sign instead of the word "dollars."

> Example: The budget is $10 million.

When approximate range amounts are specified, spell out the words.

> Example: Our total budget was two or three thousand dollars last year.

When currencies but no amounts are specified, or currencies other than dollars are specified, spell out the words.

> Example: Before leaving, I exchanged my remaining euros back to dollars.

Numbers
Spell out numbers one through nine, above that, use the number.

Proper Names
If only the last or first name is used, add the other name in brackets when it first appears. This applies to all names, even those that are well known.

> Example: My paternal grandfather, James [Ponte], built this house.

> Example : For a brief time, I served on [former Oregon Governor, John] Kitzhaber's advisory committee.

Publication and Media Names
Italicize the title of books, newspapers, magazines, movies, and TV shows.

> Example: They ran a story about the business in the *New York Times*.

Note that in the example, "the" is not italicized or capitalized.

Quotes
For quoted dialogue, always use full quotes (" "), and put a comma before the quoted passage, which should begin with a capital letter.

> Example: My wife said to me, "When you retire, I want to move back to Oregon."

Never use quotes for interior monologue, which is by definition thought, not said. Instead, indicate the thought with *italics* if it's a short passage.

> Example: I thought, *What kind of a question was that*?

Tips for Dealing with Dialect, False Starts, Inaudible Passages, Non-Verbals, and Profanity

Dialect
Avoid using phonetic spellings to indicate dialect. For example, use "going to" for "gonna," "got to" for "gotta," "want to" for "wanna," etc. In general, try to use "yes" for "yeah."

In some instances use of ungrammatical language, such as "Betcha" and "Ain't," is okay to transcribe. Slang such as "y'all" is acceptable—very occasionally—if that's what was spoken, although it should not be used extensively for regional approximations a la Mark Twain.

False Start
A false start is a thought that is begun but never finished. In general, false starts should be removed from transcripts. An example of a false start is shown below in *italics*.

> Example:
> JS: "*My friend Mark and I would often go—*. When I was a teenager, my favorite thing to do was fish. I'd fish all over this county. Me and my buddies fished a lot. It was fishing that I met my wife."

Inaudible and Indecipherable Passages
First, try to make out the words by listening to the audio file multiple times. If the section is still indecipherable, indicate so in the text by placing brackets around the word "inaudible."

> Example: Our first home was in east Portland on [inaudible] Street.

Non–Verbals
Use a bracket and *italicized* text to indicate non-verbal communication such as laughter, gestures, etc.

> Example: My grandfather is buried there [*pointing out the window*], under that large oak tree.

> Example: I hitchhiked all the way from Missouri to Oregon, [*laughing*] my mom was so worried.

For pauses in the recording for a meal or other occurrence, place the word "break" (all caps) in brackets to indicate the pause.

> Example: [BREAK]

Profanity

The rule for including or excluding profanity depends on the publication type and audience. In general, these words are important to the transcription because they communicate the force with which a particular point is made. For the HCRH Oral History Project, profanity should not be included, but should be noted by ellipses (. . .) and asterisks (**).

Example: I told him, "No, I'm not going to …**… do it, it's too dangerous!"

Text Format

Spacing

Use one space after the speaker's name and before his/her words. Use one space between sentences. If necessary, eliminate extra spaces with a global search and replace.

Font and Margins: Typeface should be Times New Roman, 12 point, regular kerning. No hyphenation or widow/orphan control. Margins: 1" right and left, top and bottom. Use rag right justification for all text.

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