

QUEENS MEMORY ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION STYLE GUIDE

Adapted from the [Oral History Transcription Style Guide \(2018 and 2022\)](#) by Columbia University's Center for Oral History Research.

Paragraph Breaks

Listen for changes of subject and for transitions in the speaker's train of thought. Try to avoid overly long paragraphs, as they become difficult for readers to clearly understand. When a speaker's words span multiple pages, at least two paragraph breaks per page is a good place to start

False Starts

False starts include both sentences and words that are cut short before completion. False starts most frequently occur when a person has misspoken, in which case they will often stop and correct themselves. False starts may also occur when one thought is interrupted by another as the person is speaking. In such cases, once the interrupting thought is expressed, the speaker will often repeat and complete the initial thought.

If repeated after the interrupting thought, the initial false start can be omitted.

On recording: Mom made the best—dad couldn't stand them, but mom made the best pancakes
In transcript: Dad couldn't stand them, but mom made the best pancakes.

If the speaker does not return to the initial thought, the false start should be transcribed in the text.

Interviewee: Mom made the best—dad couldn't stand them, though.

If a false start, regardless of whether it is subsequently corrected or completed, contributes valuable meaning to the text, it should not be omitted from the transcript. Instead, punctuate the break in the sentence with an em-dash. Also, intentional repetition of phrases for emphasis should be preserved.

Unfinished Sentences

As opposed to false starts, unfinished sentences are neither misspoken nor interrupted thought. While they are incomplete written clauses, they may represent complete spoken thoughts or expressions. Punctuate the end of an unfinished sentence with an em-dash. Do not use ellipses.

Interviewee: It was just [snaps]—he was always that quick about it.

Interviewee: Well, I'm afraid of heights, so—

Unclear

When a speaker's words cannot be deciphered in the recording, even after multiple reviews, mark such moment [unclear] in-line with the text.

Interviewee: She'd call sometimes [unclear] if I couldn't [unclear].

Phonetic

Phonetic notation may be used when a complete name or proper spelling could not be verified in the transcript review process. Insert [phonetic] to the immediate right of the word or phrase it refers to.

Interviewee: Candace [phonetic] was a neighbor when I was a kid.

Crosstalk

When multiple speakers talk over each other to the point where the recording is unclear, mark such moments as [crosstalk] in-line with the text.

Interviewer: That couldn't [crosstalk]—

Interviewee: —[crosstalk] back then.

When multiple speakers talk over each other, but their words are not unclear, represent their simultaneous speech as a series of sequential interjections using em-dashes.

Interviewer: That couldn't have been—

Interviewee: Well, it was Adam—

Interviewer: —it was Adam?

Interviewee: —because I wasn't working back then.

Parenthetical Statements and Asides

Slight breaks in a sentence, such as interjections, parenthetical statements, and nonrestrictive clauses, can be enclosed in commas.

Interviewee: He screamed as loud as he could, which wasn't that loud, but they got the point.

Stronger breaks, such as asides for explanation or comment, can be enclosed in em-dashes.

Interviewee: I had a teacher—I think her name was Alexis—who really taught me about this.

Vernacular Language

The diversity of English vernacular is only growing, and the challenge of oral history transcription is to portray this diversity without imposing biases on the text.

- 1) Maintain a consistent approach. Be as transparent as possible about the methods of that approach so that future readers may clearly interpret the source.
- 2) Spoken words often run together, and some letters may go un-pronounced. Non-standard contractions (goin', woulda) should be transcribed as they are said by the speaker.
- 3) Slang words or phrases may be unclear to people outside their common social or geographical groups. Provide clarification, if necessary, in brackets the first time each word appears in the interview's transcript.
- 4) Non-standard words of agreement and disagreement (yeah, yep, nope, nah) should be transcribed as they are said by the speaker, unless they are said so frequently, they qualify as "filler" sounds (see below)

Foreign Language Words and Phrases

Spell and capitalize foreign language words as they would commonly be spelled and capitalized in their place of origin, and set them in italics.

Provide a translation of the word or phrase, in brackets, the first time it appears in the interview.

Interviewee: He just said, "*Addio* [goodbye]."

Proper nouns, however, are the exception. Do not italicize foreign language proper nouns, such as places, institutions, companies, and brand names.

Interviewee: We had always dreamed of seeing The Ka'bah one day.

"Filler" Sounds

Sounds of encouragement or agreement (uh-huh, mmm-hmm, yup), disagreement (uh-uh) and questioning (hmm?) are often used reflexively in conversation and may be used by an interviewer while an interviewee speaks, or vice versa. These sounds are likely to clutter a transcript and should be omitted in most cases if they don't add meaning to the transcript.

In most cases, any meaning these types of utterances carry is better expressed in the recording of the interview than in the transcript, and they do not need to be transcribed.

Likewise, “Pause Fillers” or sounds or words vocalized as a speaker thinks of what to say next, (uh,um, hmm, like, you know) do not communicate meaning and can be omitted.

Non-verbal Communication

This may include actions and gestures, affect, and other expressive sounds, as well as notations of modified speech, such as singing.

Interviewee: The song goes—[sings] “lavender’s blue dilly, dilly—” slowly, like that.

Interviewee: She talked [imitates accent] like this.

Do not include environmental sounds, such as sirens or ringing phones, or other incidental noises made by the speakers, such as coughs or sneezes, unless such occurrences explicitly become part of the conversation.

Notation of non-verbal communication must be clear, consistent, and must avoid editorializing or over-interpreting. For example, write [laughs], not [giggles] or [smirks]. Write [shows emotion], not [gets choked up] or [begins to weep]. Insert notation in-line, as with any other word in a speaker’s sentence.

Examples of common notations and their use:

[laughs]—The speaker laughs.

[laughter]—Multiple speakers laugh together.

[sighs] [gasps]—The speaker uses breath in an intentional way.

[imitates sound of an airplane] [makes sound of gunfire]—The speaker imitates a specific sound.

[pause]—There is a notable pause in dialogue. Do not use ellipses (...) to indicate a pause.

[snaps] [imitates gesture] [refers to picture]—The speaker does a specific action.

[sings] [imitates accent] [shouts]—The speaker modifies their speech in a specific way.