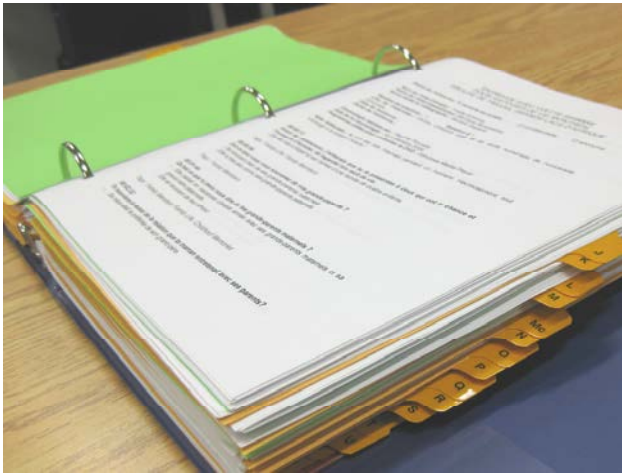# oral history
Concordia University

Interview Transcription
Webinar
December 2013

Transcription

A transcription is an <u>incomplete</u> and <u>partial</u> representation of spoken language in written form.

The written transcription is not the interview.

« Il ne faut toutefois pas oublier que les transcriptions reflètent des conversations décontextualisées. Selon [certains] auteurs, il n'est pas possible d'effectuer une transcription exacte, car le passage du langage oral au langage écrit constitue une barrière importante qui ne peut qu'être imparfaitement surmontée grâce à l'ajout du plus grand nombre de notes de contexte possible. »

Gauthier, Benoît. Recherche sociale: De la problématique à la collecte des données, Presses universitaires du Québec, 2008.

Why transcribe?

"Transcriptions have long been at the core of our post-interview methodology and the key to accessing pre-existing interviews. We don't generally spend much time with the oral source itself. We therefore lose orality at an early stage in the research process. Too often, we don't know what to do with the voice so we turn to the transcript. We know that the voice is important, but how do we study it? We know that body language and facial expression are highly meaningful, but how do we begin to read these? In part, oral history database tools promise to return the power of voice to oral history."

HIGH, Steven. "Telling Stories: A Reflection on Oral History and New Media," Oral History 38 (Spring 2010), 101-112.

The original recording will always remain the primary source of information.

New media, database softwares and creative interpretation tools are transforming the field of oral history.

However, in some cases, it may be useful to produce a written transcription to facilitate its analysis.
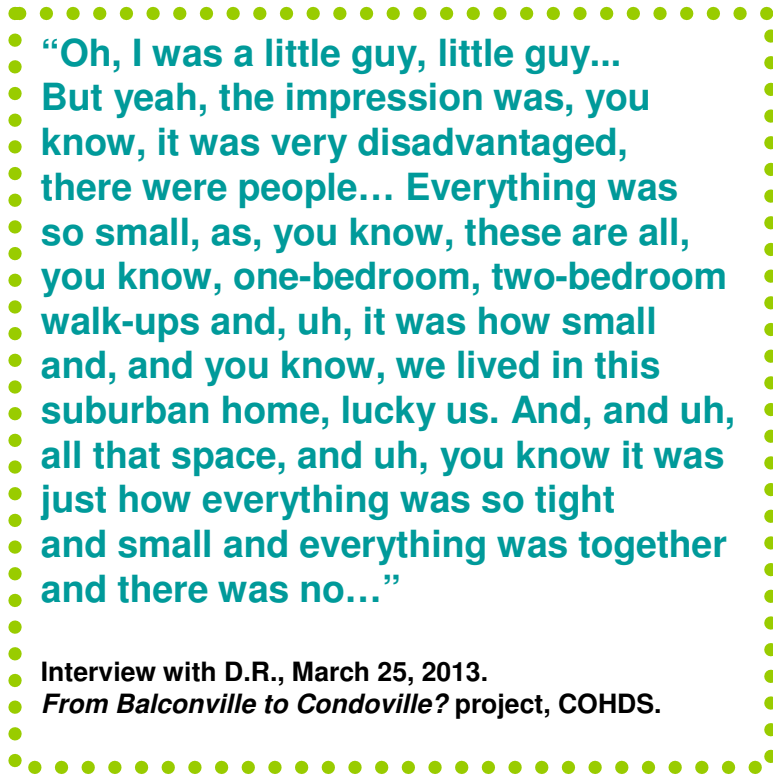
Verbatim Transcription

This method allows the researcher to gather all the verbal material without making distinctions. The data can later be analyzed more closely.

A verbatim transcription includes every single sound and word. All the "hum", "uh", hesitations and repetitions will be written down.

Ideally, the transcription can also include non verbal information such as silences, emotions, interruptions, or body language.

Verbatim transcription is tedious however. We estimate that it takes between 6 to 8 hours to transcribe one hour of recording.

"Oh, I was a little guy, little guy... But yeah, the impression was, you know, it was very disadvantaged, there were people… Everything was so small, as, you know, these are all, you know, one-bedroom, two-bedroom walk-ups and, uh, it was how small and, and you know, we lived in this suburban home, lucky us. And, and uh, all that space, and uh, you know it was just how everything was so tight and small and everything was together and there was no…"

Interview with D.R., March 25, 2013.
From Balconville to Condoville? project, COHDS.

Partial Transcription

"You live with your neighbors, you grow up with your neighbors, and everyone that lives around you raises you in many ways. You don't just stay confined to your apartment, you feel like the whole building is your house because you're always in and out of places and everybody shares everything and knocks on your door for sugar, for onion, all types of stuff. So I guess poverty didn't hit me until I started seeing the richer neighborhoods of my country (…). But it was a beautiful, beautiful place and that's where I grew up until I was thirteen and a half, about to turn fourteen, that's when we left."

Interview with M.S., April 14, 2010.
Montreal Life Stories project, COHDS.

Another option is to opt for a partial transcription in which the researcher would leave out the redundancies, digressions, and parts of the discussion that have no obvious connection with the research topic.

This text will later be organized to form a narrative that will be analyzed according to its structure and / or themes.

Researchers can hardly entrust such a task to another person though. Only they can decide which content should be included or not and those choices will directly affect the quality of the subsequent analysis.

Chronology

If you are planning on working closely with the original recordings for the analysis, you might produce chronologies of your interviews instead.

A chronology is an index of the interview. Using time codes, it includes a transcription of the question asked by the interviewer and summaries of the interviewee's answers. This type of document can be extremely useful while entering the interviews in a database.

Our research centre has developed a free and open-source software called Stories Matter and we have used it extensively to process interviews from major oral history projects over the years. In this case, chronology writing is always the first step of the process.

Q: Who influenced you most as a child?

She thinks her mom and her brother. Her brother is nine years older; he is her only brother and the closest sibling in age. He influenced her a lot because she thought he was "cool." A lot of his music and friends influenced her. Her mom was a big figure in her life as well.

Interview M.B., May 12, 2010.
***Montreal Life Stories* project, COHDS.**

Template

Before starting the transcription process, we recommend that researchers establish a generic template that will be used by themselves as well as research assistants and anyone hired to transcribe interviews. Each project can create a template according to its needs.

It should include:
- **Format**
- **Header**
- **Interviewee biographical information**
- **Time codes**
- **Identifying different speakers**
- **Non verbal and technical information**

Template: Format

First, you want to decide on the format of your document: font and size, page numbers, line spacing, justification, and margins. You also need to set some rules for the use of italics, bold, and quotation marks. This will be very important if there are many people involved in the transcription process and will ensure a certain level of consistency.

INTERVIEW WITH PEDRO JIMENEZ
MONTREAL LIFE STORIES
ORAL HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE WORKING GROUP

> Comment [OHC1]:
> Page set up: Portrait, 1.1"
> (2.54 cm) margins.
> Title: Arial, 14 pts, bold,
> centered, title of project in italic,
> single line spacing.

Interview Status: X open to public   ☐ confidential   ☐ anonymous

> Comment [OHC2]:
> Information about the interview:
> Arial, 10 pts, left aligned, titles
> in bold, single line spacing.

Name of interviewee: Pedro Jimenez (P.J.)
Name of interviewer: Clara Gomez (C.G.)
Name of videographer: N/A

> Comment [OHC3]:
> Check interview status, bold
> and underline.

Number of sessions: 3   Session # 1 (November 21, 2008)
Length of interview: 7h32
Place of interview: Interviewee's home
Dates of interview: November 21 and 29, 2008 and January 16, 2009
Language of interview: English

> Comment [OHC4]: Use the
> interviewee's initials or
> pseudonym for "confidential"
> and "limited access" interviews.
> Use the interviewee's number
> for "anonymous interviews"
> (Anonymous #3, 'A.3')

Name of transcriber: Jose Garcia
Date of transcription: 9-11 November, 2009
Software used to read DVD: Windows Media Player

> Comment [OHC5]:
> Indicate initials. You will use
> them while transcribing.

Editorial Note:
The interview was easy to transcribe. The interviewee made continues phrases without hesitation. Sometimes the sound is not clear enough.

> Comment [OHC6]:
> Editorial note: optional.
> Keep in mind that this note will
> be read by the interviewee...

Template: Header

Include:

- Project title
- Name of interviewee
- Interview status
- Interviewer and videographer's names
- Total number of interview sessions
- Place(s) and date(s)
- Name of transcriber
- Date of transcription
- Software used to read the recording
- Editorial notes
- Interviewee's Biographical information

INTERVIEW WITH PEDRO JIMENEZ
MONTREAL LIFE STORIES
ORAL HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE WORKING GROUP

Interview Status: X <u>open to public</u>   ☐ confidential   ☐ anonymous

Name of interviewee: Pedro Jimenez (P.J.)
Name of interviewer: Clara Gomez (C.G.)
Name of videographer: N/A

Number of sessions: 3   **Session #** 1 (November 21, 2008)
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Editorial Note:
The interview was easy to transcribe. The interviewee made continues phrases without hesitation. Sometimes the sound is not clear enough.

Interviewee's Biographical Details.
Pedro Jimenez was born in 1948 in Santiago de Chile. He grew up in Santiago with his brother and his parents. He studied political science and became involved in his community at an early age. In September of 1973, he was arrested and detained in the stadium. He lived through the Pinochet dictatorship. Pedro and his family left Chile in 1992. He now lives in Montreal with his wife and has 4 grandchildren.

Template: Biographical Information

"J.L. is third generation Chinese Canadian and was born in Toronto in a family of 7. She remembers her father as a very hardworking man who earned the money for the family and her mother as an implicated woman who did a lot to help improve the status of the Chinese in Canada. J.L. developed a passion for music in her young days that has followed her ever since. After moving to Vancouver, she began playing in an all woman band and was involved in various activist groups. Involvement has also played a central part of her life as she was a social worker with juvenile delinquents while in Vancouver. J.L. moved to Montreal in 1984 and it is in this city that she began making music for films as a living. For the past years, she has taken a more administrative role and played a pivotal role in organizing an important festival promoting Chinese Art and culture."

J.L.'s biographical information.
Montreal Life Stories project, COHDS.

While watching and transcribing the interview, note all information to be included in the interviewee's biographical information such as the interviewee's date and place of birth, age and occupation at the time of the interview, important aspects of their family history, education and career milestones, and change of place (between countries, provinces / states, or neighbourhoods, for example), and any other important themes.

Template: Time Codes

Time codes should always include three time markers: **hours/minutes/seconds**, each being separated by a colon. Most video players display them automatically.

In the transcription, time codes should precede any question asked by the interviewer.

If the interviewee's answer is longer than a few minutes, we recommend that you include the time code at every 5 or 10 minutes.

Template: Identifying Speakers

In the header, add the initials of the different speakers between brackets. These will be used all along the transcription.

INTERVIEW WITH PEDRO JIMENEZ
MONTREAL LIFE STORIES
ORAL HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE WORKING GROUP

Interview Status: X **open to public**   ☐ confidential   ☐ anonymous

Name of interviewee: Pedro Jimenez (P.J.)
Name of interviewer: Clara Gomez (C.G.)
Name of videographer: N/A

Before transcribing questions or answers, write the initials of the speaker.

00:00:05
C.G.: When and where were you born?
P.J.: I was born in 1948 in Santiago de Chile. I studied elementary school at a Jesuit College where I finished grade six and then I went to the Liceo [vague] where I finished high school.

Tag terms: souvenirs d'enfance / childhood memories

00:00:48
C.G.: Could you please tell us about your childhood in Chile?
P.J.: I have good memories of my childhood in Santiago... At that time, my parents were working in a restaurant and my brother and I would go and spend time there after school. Their boss was a little grumpy but he would let us go in the kitchen and help my father. My grand-mother was staying with us because my grand-father died when I was 3 or 4 years old... [Pause, counts on his fingers] No, no, I was 2 when he died. So she was alone. She would take care of us and cook a lot.

Tag terms: souvenirs d'enfance / childhood memories famille / family

Template: Non-Verbal Information

While transcribing, write additional information such as pauses, silences, or body language between brackets. You can also use brackets to insert technical information such as sound quality, incapacity to understand certain words or sentences, or to make a note when you need to verify the correct spelling of names of places or people.

00:00:48
C.G.: Could you please tell us about your childhood in Chile?
P.J.: I have good memories of my childhood in Santiago… At that time, my parents were working in a restaurant and my brother and I would go and spend time there after school. Their boss was a little grumpy but he would let us go in the kitchen and help my father. My grand-mother was staying with us because my grand-father died when I was 3 or 4 years old… [Pause, counts on his fingers] No, no, I was 2 when he died. So she was alone. She would take care of us and cook a lot.

Transcription Manual

De Balconville à Condoville?

Précis de transcription

Quelques règles générales qui ont servies de guide pour la transcription d'entrevues.

Notes générales		
Cas	*Code de transcription*	*Source*
Hésitations et phases interrompues	On l'indique avec « ... » En français et en anglais, on ne transcrit pas les « euh », « hum », « ah », « er », um » ...	
Abréviations	Sauf si l'abréviation est mentionnée par l'interviewé(e) (p. ex. la SAQ), ne pas transcrire l'abréviation. P. ex. «Madame Ruel » et non pas « Mme. Ruel »	
Acronymes	Mettre entre crochet pour la première occurrence (p. ex. «J'ai travaillé pour le CN [Canadien National] pendant 25 ans...»)	
Chiffres	Les chiffres un à neuf sont écrits en lettres. Les nombres en chiffre (10, 11, 12...).	
Mots de langue étrangère	Mis en *italique*. Les anglicismes ne sont pas marqués par l'italique.	
Mots créés (ou pas au dictionnaire)	Mis entre guillemets. « ca-canne »	
Mots inaudibles	Mis entre crochets. [inaudible]	
Mots quasi-inaudible	Mis entre crochets. [inaudible : blessures?]	
Nom de commerce, personnalité, etc. dont l'orthographe est inconnu	Mis entre crochets. [Miamresto?]	
Élision en début de mots	Indiquer une élision (en fin de mot) par une apostrophe sans exagérer. Ne pas mettre d'apostrophe au début ou au milieu du mot pour marquer une élision sauf quelques exceptions possible : «AVEC» et non « 'EC» ou «AKE» «EXCUSE» et non «'SCUSE» «C'ÉTAIT» et non «C'TAIT» «SU' LA» et non «SU' A»	Vivian Labrie. Précis de transcription de documents d'archives orales, 1982.

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Create your own transcription manual which should include precise information on how to write hesitations and interruptions, abbreviations, acronyms, numbers, words in another language or not in the dictionary, inaudible words and sentences, or unknown names of companies, places or personalities.

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Transcription Tools

The foot pedal allows transcribers to control the video player with their foot. Both hands can then remain on the keyboard and there is no need to press play and pause with the mouse.

A good pair of headphones is also necessary. Sound quality is always better with headphones than speakers. Earbuds should be avoided as they can hurt your ears.

Conclusion
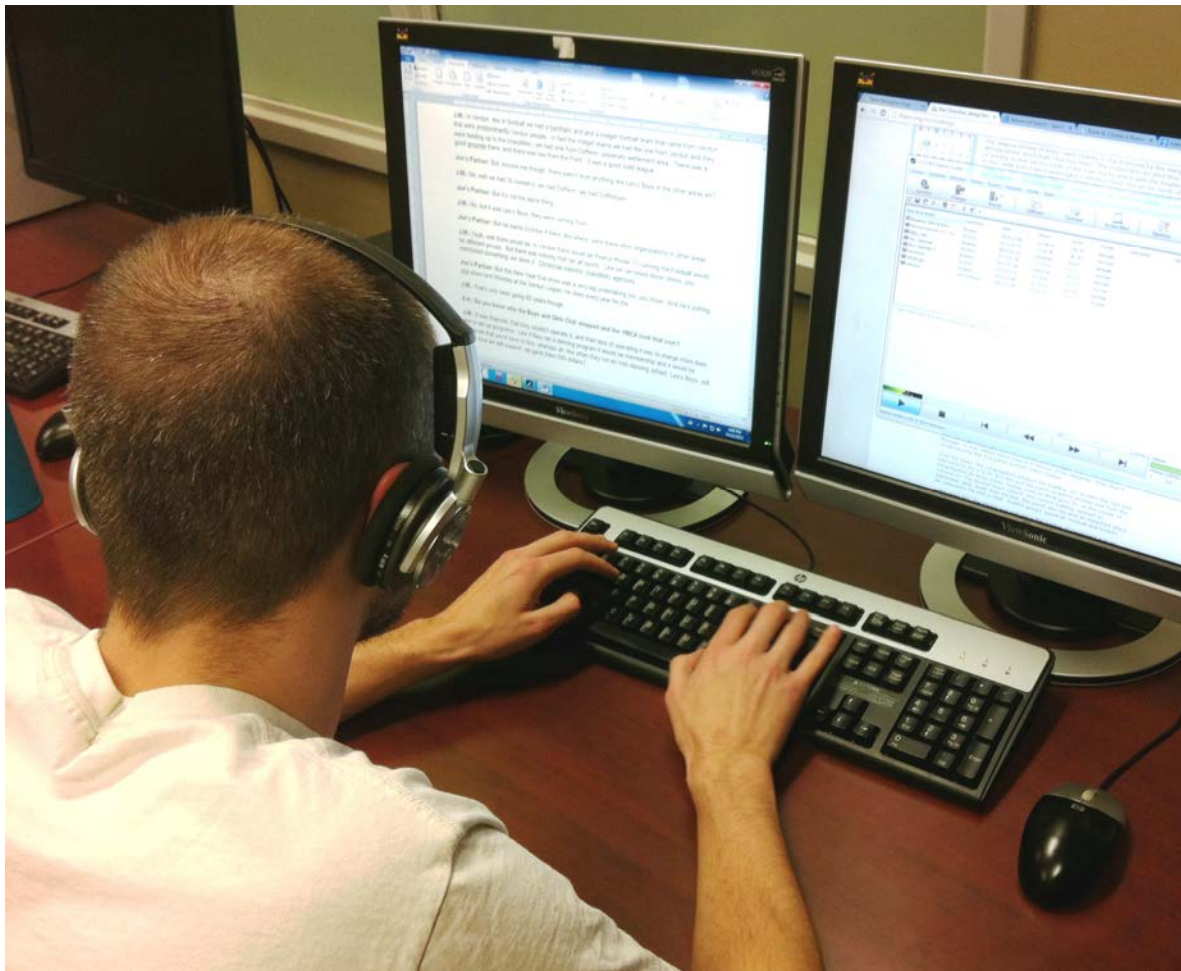
Take frequent breaks to stretch and relax.

Revise your work at the end of every page.

Good luck!

Credits

This webinar was designed in December 2013 by Eve-Lyne Cayouette Ashby,
Associate Director of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS).

It gathers content produced by different researchers, staff members and projects
based at COHDS such as the *Montreal Life Stories* CURA (lifestoriesmontreal.ca),
and the *From Balconville to Condoville*? project
(postindustrialmontreal.ca/project/balconville-condoville)
as well as renowned authors and oral historians.

Our protocols and materials can be used and adapted for any non-for-profit, educational,
and academic purposes but the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling must be credited.

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