

## Realities Toolkit #15

# Using an external agency or individual to transcribe your qualitative data

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### Introduction

Although outsourcing your transcribing can save you typing time, it is not always straightforward. You will probably want to check through and correct the transcripts when you get them back, and this will take at least as long as the original recording time, so you will need to plan some of your time to do this. If your transcriber is inaccurate you will spend much more time correcting transcripts. Transcribing costs often go over budget if you don't plan carefully. Without a system for logging your transcriptions it can be difficult to keep track of which transcripts are done, which still need doing and how much money you have left in your budget. You need to be confident that the transcriber will follow any ethical guidelines that you are working with and that they have a sensible approach to data protection. This toolkit is designed to make the experience of sending your recordings away to somebody else for transcribing as painless as possible.

If you are doing some or all of your own transcribing, see Realities toolkit #08: 'Transcribing your own qualitative data'. Available from:  
<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits/transcribing-your-data/>

### Budgeting

Outsourcing your transcribing can be expensive so if you are thinking of sending your recordings to a transcriber you will need to make sure that you have a budget for this. Check that your budget is sufficient to cover the amount of transcribing you need before you start sending recordings off to be transcribed.

Most transcribers will charge one of two ways, either:

1. per recorded minute/hour, or
2. by the time taken to transcribe the recording (by the minute or hour).

The first option seems to be the most common, and it also has the advantage that you know what the costs will be before you send your recordings away to be transcribed. Individuals offering a transcribing service often prefer to charge an hourly rate for their work. If you find a reliable person this system can work out well and result in consistent transcripts because they are all done by the same person. It can also end up being slightly cheaper than using a transcribing agency, though you might experience 'bottlenecks' receiving finished transcripts if you send off recordings all at once. It does, however, make estimating costs in advance a bit more difficult. If you are considering using an agency or individual that charges an hourly rate for their time, you might like to send one recording, or part of a recording, so you can get an idea of costs before you send a big batch.



**Our transcription costs calculator will help you estimate the total transcription costs for your project (takes a minute or two to fill in, but can save a lot of stress later). From: [www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits)**

When you are doing your budget, speak to your potential transcriber and check that you have included *all* the costs. Once you have had this discussion, make sure that you confirm the details in writing so that any misunderstandings can be cleared up.

Some useful questions to ask are:

- Is VAT included if applicable?
- Is there a supplementary charge to transcribe poor quality recordings? If this is the case, then ask to be told in advance if this supplementary charge will be applied.
- Is there a supplementary charge for more than one interviewee?
- Is there a supplementary charge for a quick turnaround?
- Are there any other costs I should budget for?

You will probably find that each recording starts with some small talk, an explanation of the interview process and a discussion of informed consent. Depending on your methodology, you might feel that you can skip transcribing these sections. If so, then you will need to give the transcriber a clue of where to start. You can usually do this by starting with a common question and asking them to start transcribing when they hear this phrase. Doing this may save 5-10 minutes transcribing for each interview, saving you money.

## Choosing a transcriber

Always ask friends and colleagues for recommendations: the cheapest transcriber is unlikely to be the best option if the transcripts they produce are inaccurate or inconsistent, because you will need to spend more time correcting them.

It is worth checking if your organisation has any institutional rules about using transcribers: for example, some organisations might have a list of preferred suppliers and NHS researchers will need to set up an honorary contract with any external transcriber.

Again, it is a good idea to speak to a few potential transcribers about their work. Some good questions to ask are listed below, but remember that the qualities you will probably value most in a transcriber are reliability, accuracy and consistency. Sometimes a reliable, efficient individual will suit your needs better than the biggest transcribing agency.

- What system do they have for receiving recordings and returning transcripts? Many transcribers use a secure internet connection where you upload your recordings through a web page, and we find this convenient. Whatever system is used, make sure that you are satisfied about data security.
- How long will it take to return the finished transcript? Are there any busy periods where this will not apply? Some transcribers charge an extra fee for a quick turnaround or a low rate for less urgent transcripts.
- Can I send my own formatting guidelines? (See below for more on this.)
- What files can you accept? Most transcribers can accept a range of common audio file formats eg .mp3 .wav
- What kind of transcribing do you do already? Experience of transcribing research data may be useful.
- Who does the transcribing? If there are only one or two people involved this can help consistency and quality, though of course large agencies shouldn't be discounted because of this.

If your methodological approach means that you need your transcripts produced in a particular way, for example if you will be using conversation analysis, then you will need to find a transcriber experienced in this kind of work and you should expect to pay more.

When you have chosen a suitable person or organisation it is a good idea to send one recording for transcribing and wait to see the finished transcript before you send any more. This way you can check the turnaround time and the accuracy of the transcript.

## Managing the transcription process

Setting up a good system to manage your recordings, transcripts and payments will make keeping track of the work easier and it should stop you getting into a real mess where you don't know which recordings you have sent off or whether you have enough money left to pay for all the transcribing you have ordered.

We find it helpful to log on a simple spreadsheet when recordings have been sent for transcribing, when the transcript has been returned, and when the work has been paid for. This should help you keep track of your recordings, and your budget. You can also add extra columns to this spreadsheet if you want to record whether you have checked/corrected/annotated/anonymised the returned transcript.

| Ref | Pseudonym | Recording sent | Transcript returned | Transcript checked | Cost (£) | Paid? |
|-----|-----------|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|
| 001 | Linden    | 01/10/2010     | 12/10/2010          | 15/10/2010         | 96.40    | Yes   |
| 002 | Mary      | 01/10/2010     | 12/10/2010          | 16/10/2010         | 88.32    | Yes   |
| 003 | Hannah    | 05/10/2010     | 14/10/2010          |                    | 84.12    |       |
| 004 | Steve     | 07/10/2010     |                     |                    |          |       |
| 005 | Janice    | 07/10/2010     |                     |                    |          |       |
|     |           |                |                     |                    |          |       |
|     |           |                |                     |                    |          |       |

Sample transcribing log

If you send a lot of recordings for transcribing in one go, but particularly want one or two of them returned earlier, you can help your transcriber by letting them know which transcripts to prioritise.

## Improving transcript quality (I)

It really is worth taking some time to think about ways that you can help your transcriber produce a good quality, accurate, transcript, because it will save you time checking and correcting it and it will make it easier for you to work with the transcripts when you are analysing them.

The first step is to produce the best possible quality recording so that it can be transcribed quickly and accurately. You don't have to be a professional sound engineer but half an hour experimenting with your equipment in similar conditions to your interviews/fieldwork will be time well spent.

For example, even small digital recorders will often have different settings for different situations eg dictation, conference or lecture and you can often boost recording quality just by picking the most appropriate of these predefined settings.



Using an external microphone plugged into your recorder can improve sound quality and if you are making recordings outside you might find that it helps to put a foam windshield over the microphone.

Choose as quiet a location as possible, and if the location is a bit noisy, put the microphone in the best position to pick up your interviewee's words even if it means that what you say might not record so well. (You are likely to prioritise what they say in your analysis, and it will usually be easier to fill in any unintelligible gaps in your side of the conversation than theirs.)

## Improving transcript quality (II)

Another way to improve transcript quality is to give your transcriber clear instructions for formatting your transcript. Think about how you are going to work with the finished transcript and send as much information as you can to help the transcriber produce a document that most closely matches your end requirements.

Some of the questions to ask yourself when you are thinking about this are:

- Is there any information that you need at the beginning of every transcript, or on each page eg reference number, pseudonym, interview date or interview location?
- Will you be using any software eg Atlas.ti or Nvivo to help you analyse the data? If so, you might find that complicated formatting is best avoided (check the Help files of your chosen software for guidelines).
- Do you plan on archiving your data? If so, check which file formats and preferences the archive prefers and try and get the transcripts to match this as closely as possible. This will save you having to change file formats or document formatting before you send your data for archiving.

- Do you want page numbers? Where?
- Do you want line numbers?
- How should the transcriber indicate a new speaker?
- How should the transcriber indicate when a speaker hesitates or makes a noise like “um” or “er”?
- How should they indicate laughter, jokes, or other information such as if the interviewee leaves the room or another person comes into the room?
- How faithful to the actual words spoken should the transcriber be? This will depend on the type of analysis you are planning but many researchers will want to specify that the transcripts do not correct slips or less than perfect grammar.
- How should the transcriber mark words or longer sections of the script that they can’t understand? (A common way would be to note [unintelligible] and perhaps to include the exact point in the recording where this occurs eg [unintelligible 27:04].) It is likely that the researcher will be better able to work out what the missing word or phrase is than the transcriber, or be able to decide that the word is completely unfathomable but not vital for the analysis.

Write down all this information in one document and send it to your transcriber so they can refer to it when they are doing your transcripts. If you get the first few transcripts back and realise that you have missed something out, just re-write your instructions and send the new version to your transcriber. If it has been a while since you last sent a recording for transcribing, you might want to re-send your instructions.

You might find it useful to send your transcriber a glossary of words that aren’t used much in everyday conversation but that do crop up in your interviews. You can include things like: jargon, local places, acronyms and abbreviations and slang – anything that might help the transcriber understand what is being said and therefore help them produce a more accurate transcript.

| Term                             | Explanation  | How to transcribe |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| NQT                              | Newly qualified teacher  | leave as it is    |
| Mr Cooke                         | Class teacher  | Mr Cooke          |
| Mrs Palmer                       | Head teacher   | [head teacher]    |
| Chester's                        | Local chippy   | leave as it is    |
| On the star/standing on the star | Children have to stand on the star pattern outside the head teacher's office when they have been naughty | leave as it is    |

**Sample glossary table**

## Ethical considerations

Check that the transcribing process you have chosen fits with the ethical guidelines you have set out for yourself or that your organisation has set out for you. Make sure that your transcriber knows, understands, and can comply with these guidelines. In particular, check what processes they have for ensuring storing and deleting all copies of your files.

Even projects on everyday topics will sometimes produce data that you feel is particularly sensitive. If this happens, then you should consider whether you need to hold these recordings back for transcribing yourself in order to protect your participant.

Equally, think about your ethical responsibilities to your transcribers. If you have experience of transcribing interviews yourself, then you will know that the process of

listening intently to research interviews can be an emotional one, especially if they are about difficult or sensitive topics. Most transcribers are not paid megabucks and they are unlikely to receive special training or counselling to help them deal with the emotional impact of any distressing interviews. If you think this might apply to any of your recordings then think about calling your transcriber in advance to speak about it.

## Saving time checking and annotating transcripts

Hopefully, some of the suggestions above have helped you find a good, accurate transcriber, produce high quality recordings and clearly formatted transcripts which will help cut down on the time it takes you to check through, correct, annotate and anonymise your transcripts.

Using a foot pedal while checking and annotating transcripts could save time and be more convenient, because it means that you can play, pause and rewind the recording without taking your fingers off the computer keyboard.



The amount and type of work you do on your transcripts when they have been sent back to you will depend on the methodology you are using, but most researchers will listen to the original recording while checking it against the transcript to correct any errors in the transcription. Even very good transcribers will make the odd mistake, or not be able to pick up every word on the recording. You will also need to fill in any gaps that the transcriber has marked [unintelligible] (if you can!). You might also want to add in extra information to help your analysis, for instance, describing things the participants did that don't appear in the transcript because they aren't verbalised.

**Feedback welcome!** If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at [realities@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:realities@manchester.ac.uk) and let us know.



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