

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

A collaborative research project to evaluate and provide sustainable recommendations for our digital preservation programmes

Transcribing interviews

Posted on [30 June, 2017](#) by [ljp](#)

The second instalment of Lee's experience running a skills audit at Cambridge University Library. He explains what is needed to be able to transcribe the lengthy and informative interviews with staff.

There's no ground-breaking digital preservation goodness contained within this post so you have permission to leave this page now. However, this groundwork is crucial to gaining an understanding of how institutions can prepare for digital preservation skills and knowledge development. It may also be useful to anyone who is preparing to transcribe recorded interviews.

Post-interview: transcribing the recording

Once you have interviewed your candidates and made sure that you have all the recordings (suitably backed up three times into private, network free storage like an encrypted USB stick so as to respect privacy wishes), it is time to transcribe.

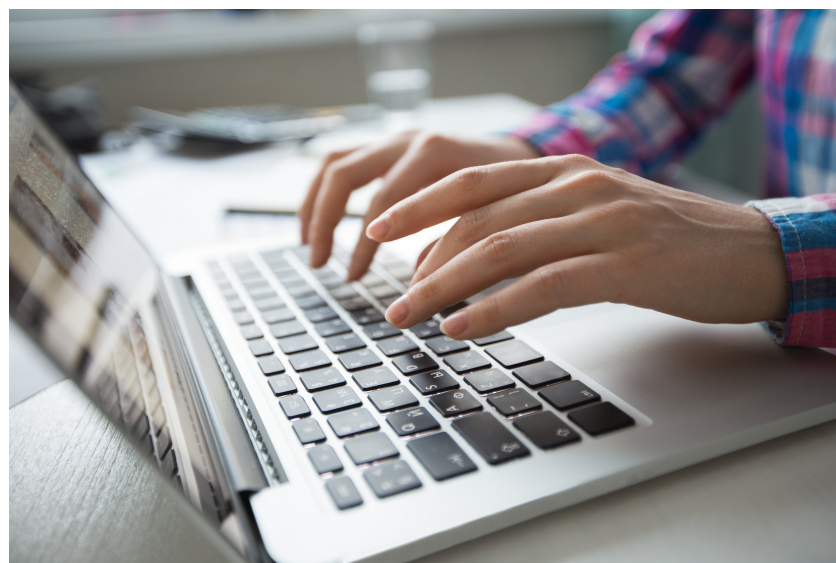
So, what do you need?

- **A very quiet room.** Preferably silence, where there are no distractions and where you can't distract people. You may wish to choose the dictation path and if you do that in an open plan office, you may attract attention. You will also be reciting information that you have assured will remain confidential.

- **Audio equipment.** You will need a device that can play your audio files and has an audio control player built into it. You can use your device's speakers, headphones, preferably with a control device built into the wire, or foot pedal.
- **Time.** Bucket loads of it. If you are doing other work, this needs to become the big rock in your time planning, everything else should be mere pebbles and sand. This is where manager support is really helpful, as is...
- **Understanding.** The understanding that this will rule your working life for the next month or two and the understanding of those around the size of the task of what you are doing. To have an advocate who has experience of this type of work before is invaluable.
- **Patience.** Of a saint.
- **Simple transcription rules.** Given the timeframes of the project, complex transcription would have been too time consuming. Please see the following work below, as used by the University of California, San Diego, it's really useful with nice big text.

Dresing, Thorsten/Pehl, Thorsten/Schmieder, Christian (2015): Manual (on) Transcription. Transcription Conventions, Software Guides and Practical Hints for Qualitative Researchers. 3rd English Edition. Marburg Available Online: <http://www.audiotranskription.de/english/transcription-practicalguide.htm>

(Last accessed: 27.06.2017). ISBN: 978-3-8185-0497-7.



- Cropped view of person hands typing on laptop computer. Image credit: [Designed by Freepik](#)

What did you do?

Using a Mac environment, I imported the audio files for transcription into a desktop folder and created a play list in iTunes. I reduced the iTunes application to the mini player view and opened up Word to type into. I plugged in my headphones and pressed play and typed as I was listening.

If you get tired typing, the Word application on my Mac has a nifty voice recognition package. It's uncannily good now. Whilst I tried to route the output sound into the mic by using Soundflower (I wasted time doing this as when the transcription did yield readable text, it used words worthy of inciting a Mary Whitehouse campaign) I did find that dictation provided a rest for weary fingers. After a while, you will probably need to rest a weary voice, so you can switch back to typing.

When subjects starting talking quickly, I needed a way to slow them down as constantly pressing pause and rewind got onerous. A quick fix for this was to download [Audacity](#). This has the function to slow down your sound files. Once the comedic effect of voice alteration has worn off, it becomes easier to transcribe as you don't have to pause and rewind as much.

Process wise, it doesn't sound much and it isn't. It's just the sheer hours of audio that needs to be made legible through listening, rewinding and typing.

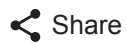
How can the process be made (slightly) easier?

- **Investigate transcription technology and processes.**
Investigate technologies available beforehand that you can access. I wish I had done this rather than rely on the expectation that I would be just listening and typing. I didn't find a website with *the* answer but a thoughtful web search can help you with certain parts of the transcription method.
- **Talk slowly.** This one doesn't apply to the transcription process but the interview process. Try and ask the questions a little bit slower than you usually would as the respondent will subconsciously mimic your speed of delivery and slow themselves down

Hang on in there, it's worth it

Even if you choose to incorporate the suggestions above, be under absolutely no illusions: transcription is a gruelling task. That's not a slight against the participants' responses for they will be genuinely interesting and insightful. No, it's a comment on the frustration of the process and sheer mental grind of getting through it. I must admit I had only come to a reasonably happy transcription method by the time I had reached number fourteen (of fifteen). However, the effort is completely worth it. In the end, I now have around 65,000 quality words (research data) to analyse to understand what existing digital skills, knowledge, ways of learning and managing change exist within my institution that can be fed into the development of digital preservation skills and knowledge.

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