

# Editing an Oral History Transcript

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Overwhelmingly, researchers prefer using transcripts over listening to recorded interviews. Therefore, the transcription and editing process of interviews should be a priority in designing and completing an oral history project. The following guide provides standards and guidelines on the editing process.

Editing an oral history interview is a matter of personal style, but there are some important principles for basic transcription. Some oral historians instruct their transcribers to record the interview verbatim, while others allow for greater latitude. Similarly there is great debate as to how much editing is appropriate. Some feel that the desire to edit a transcript should be curbed as much as possible to retain the context and feeling of the interview. Since each person edits somewhat differently, the textual context regarded by an editor as unimportant might be seen by a researcher as extremely valuable.

At the Minnesota Historical Society, we recognize that variations in editing styles will always exist. However, these differences can remain while falling within the parameters suggested in this guide. The initial draft of the transcript should be nearly a verbatim copy of the recorded interview. This allows the editor to make his or her own decisions as to how the text can be edited best. This is especially true in instances where the editor is also the interviewer. It is this person, not the transcriber, who is the most appropriate to make editing decisions, because they experienced the context and feeling of the live interview.

## General Rules:

1. Above all, the edited transcript should reflect the text of the interview as clearly as possible.
2. The transcript should not embarrass the narrator or him or her look foolish. In conversation, people often drop words or use incorrect grammar. When editing such a transcript, verb tenses should be made consistent, and subjects and verbs should agree. Personal pronouns and articles omitted in hurried speech should also be included. In addition, during a lengthy oral history interview, a narrator often repeats a story. The narrator would appear forgetful if the story was included verbatim, but to eliminate the repetition entirely would mean discarding the important details that often come from a second telling. To resolve this problem it is appropriate to include the repetition and add, “As I told you before...”
3. A transcript should also capture the flavor of a narrator’s speech. One narrator, describing his amazement at a scene, said, “The cars just kept a-coming and a-coming.” This is not exactly standard usage, but it conveys the narrator’s feelings. Another narrator pounded

his desk and exclaimed, “Those goddamned environmentalists!” Because it was a restricted interview and the narrator did not object, the remark was not edited. Clearly, his anger would not be conveyed by the edited, “Those goshdarned environmentalists!” The narrator should be consulted during the editing process. Sometimes during the interview themselves, the narrator may get worked up and say something they may regret later. If the narrator wishes to strike such comments from the transcript, the editor should honor them.

4. It should be kept in mind that these oral history transcripts may be used by researchers around the world, some of whom may be unfamiliar with expressions and proper names that are specific to a particular region. Therefore, it is important to clarify a narrator’s comments, where unclear, with the use of brackets and footnotes as explained in this guides section on editing guidelines.

All original transcripts should be audited-reading the transcript while listening to the recorded interview- by the interviewer. Generally, a series of interviews done in conjunction with a particular project should be edited by a single individual to ensure a consistent editorial style. If possible, a second person should then proof the final edited version to make certain that it is error-free. Most importantly, each interview should be tracked through the process, from the original interview to the transfer to the audio-visual collections. Interviews should not languish in a vacuum because a release form was never signed or the original transcript was never edited. If the project is not fully completed, that narrator’s voice in the historical record remains unheard. The following is a set of guidelines for common problems faced when editing and auditing an oral history transcript.

## Editing Guidelines

**Reference for editing:** The authority for editing oral history transcripts at the Minnesota Historical Society is the Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 16<sup>th</sup> edition).

**False Starts:** If the narrator begins with several words and then reorganizes his or her thoughts and resumes, delete the false start. For example

**EB:** Ernie wasn’t...he didn’t...well...I’ll tell you a story about Ernie

Should read,

**EB:** I’ll tell you a story about Ernie

**Stumbles:** If the narrator has trouble organizing his or her thoughts, delete the stumbles. For example,

**WW:** If you start to think, well, if you were to start to think, to think of the courses of interest, of current interest, to the business community...

Should read,

**WW:** If you were to start to think of courses of current interest to the business community...

**Extraneous remarks:** Conversation made while setting up or turning off the equipment that is not part of the interview can be eliminated. For example,

**MM:** Okay as I was telling you, what I would like to do is to- is to start. Oops, the mic is pointing the wrong way. Okay, there, now you can start now. Are you a native of Minnesota?

**EB:** Yes, I was born in Appleton, Minnesota. Dear, you can just put down that tea tray while we are talking. Where were we? Yes, my parents were farmers...

Should read,

**MM:** Are you a native of Minnesota?

**EB:** Yes, I was born in Appleton, Minnesota. My parents were farmers...

**Reassuring remarks or monosyllables:** Generally, these are made by the interviewer while the narrator is telling the story, but attempts should be made to limit these remarks. Any of these should be eliminated from the transcript. Examples include “yes,” “sure,” and “I see.”

**File changes:** Eliminate any notations in the final transcript regarding tape or file changes.

**Paragraphing:** Paragraphs should be used to break up long passages. A good rule to follow is to insert paragraphing when a passage is longer than a page of text. Paragraphs are flush left, with no indentation, and are indicated with a double space.

**Simultaneous speech:** If one speaker interrupts the other in mid-sentence, but the first speaker completes his or her thought, finish that sentence in the transcript first. For example,

**MM:** They couldn't afford it in Iowa, and they could get it cheaply here. If they irrigate...

**EB:** ...John Cairns was sitting with Tom today. I think he has five of those big irrigators...

**MM:** ...or practice good farming, they would be productive...

**EB:** ...out there.

Should read,

**MM:** They couldn't afford it in Iowa, and they could get it cheaply here. If they irrigate or practice good farming, they would be productive.

**EB:** John Cairns was sitting with Tom today. I think he has five of those big irrigators out there.

**Ellipsis points:** Ellipsis points should be used when a statement is unfinished (trailing off), faltering or fragmented and it appears that the narrator is confused or uncertain.

**EB:** Phil, you know... turned... I think it was...

**MM:** I...think he was... conservative....

**EM dashes:** Dashes should be used to offset parenthetical expressions, such as side remark interjected by the speaker. Do not insert spaces between the dashes and the text.

**CK:** He was just as afraid of the Foreign Service in Ottawa-I think maybe even more so-than he was afraid of anything that the United States might do.

Dashes should also be used for showing an interruption of one speaker by another.

**CK:** It gave him a sense of independence and-

**VF:** Independence, yes, and that would give him confidence as well.

**Word division:** Avoid dividing proper names with a hyphen. Correct non-standard word division. Consult the *Chicago Manual of Style* for further guidance.

**Interruptions:** Interruptions should only be indicated only if an interview is affected by them. For example, if a phone rings during the interview and the interruption causes narrator to begin a new train of thought, indicate by

[Phone Rings]

**DH:** That was John Olson who just called. He reminded me to tell you about the time that...

**Habitual qualifiers:** Eliminate most qualifiers (for example, "I think" and "I guess"), but do not eliminate all of them. This is a judgment call. For example,

**WM:** I guess it depends on who is in the legislature to fight for it. I think it depends on how active your environmental groups are going to be. I think the chances of stopping it are fairly good.

Should read,

**WM:** It depends on who is in the legislature to fight for it. It depends on how active your environmental groups are going to be. I think the chances of stopping it in the future are fairly good.

**Habitual connectives:** Eliminate most connectives that occur between sentences (“and,” “so,” “but,” “well”), but do not eliminate all of them. This is a judgment call. For example:

**WM:** And if a polluter is polluting an area, it allows the state to come in and clean it up. And if the state cleans it up, they can put a lien on a property. So eventually probably the state will be reimbursed for the clean-up. And I think that is a step in the right direction.

Should read,

**WM:** If a polluter is polluting an area, it allows the state to come in and clean it up. If the state cleans it up, they can put a lien on the property. Eventually, the state probably will be reimbursed for the clean-up. I think that is a step in the right direction.

**Crutch words:** If the narrator has a habit of saying such things as “yeah,” “you see,” “you know,” or “like,” eliminate some, but not all of these as appropriate. This is a judgment call. For example:

**WM:** Those days are over you know. But that policy did linger on for quite a few decades, see? That’s the kind of thing that you had to overcome, see? That’s an exploitation philosophy, you know, with, like, no concern for the future.

Should read,

**WM:** Those days are over, but that policy lingered on for quite a few decades. That’s the kind of thing you had to overcome, see? That’s an exploitation philosophy with no concern for the future.

**Numbers:** Whole numbers from one through ninety-nine are spelled out in ordinary text, as are any of these numbers followed by the words “hundred,” “thousand,” and “million.” For all other numbers figures are used. For example,

--Twenty-four candidates from eighteen different institutions applied for the three positions.

--The central library alone will contain 42,824 volumes.

**Brackets:** Brackets should be used to complete a name or to supply information which is not on the tape but which is necessary for clarity. Brackets are also used to describe the way something is said or the reaction of the listener, such as [Laughing]. The first letter of the word is capitalized, and there are spaces before and after the brackets. If possible, and if appropriate, avoid interrupting the text until after the speaker's sentence is complete. For example:

**CK:** I had been able to do enough work on the far, [Laughter] so I didn't need that.

Should read,

**CK:** I had been able to do enough work on the farm, so I didn't need that. [Laughter]

If both the narrator and the interviewer are laughing, indicate by [Both laugh]. Use these types of indications very sparingly. Also, use [Pause] only for lengthy pauses. Similar notations can be employed as stage directions to make a narrator's actions in relation to his or her speech more clear.

**RL:** [Shows map] Well, if we did this, this would be the project land use with current zoning.

**Footnotes:** Use footnotes for information necessary for clarity but not brief enough to be put in brackets. Footnotes are numbered sequentially through the text, rather than renumbered for each page.

**Underlining and exclamation points:** These markings should only be used to indicate very emphatic words or statements.

**Slurred words:** Use proper spelling of slurred words ("yeah" is "yes," "gonna" is "going to"). The word "yes" should be used for variants such as "uh-huh." Generally, contractions should be used as spoken.