




Making the Most of Transcription Services

Please note that while we offer transcription services, the tips below are not just written with our service in mind - they can be applied to any transcription company or individual transcriber.

Be as specific as possible

While it takes a bit of time to think through how you wish your transcripts to be formatted, it is well worth doing this in advance. This will save you having to make extensive changes to your transcripts once you receive them back. You might like to consider providing information such as the following:

-  **Specific formatting requirements**, particularly if you are using data analysis software. Keep in mind that most transcribers will be unfamiliar with these software packages and will need explicit instructions (our service is obviously an exception).
-  **A list of technical or jargon terms used**. This will greatly increase the accuracy of the transcripts. Remember that an everyday term to you, may well be unknown to someone outside of your discipline.
-  **A copy of your interview schedule**, if you are using one may also be helpful, or any field notes that you have taken during the interview itself.

Get an estimate of costs

There is enormous variation in the charging systems used by transcription services. Most charge by the hour, some charge a one-off set-up fee, others by the length of time of the recording itself. If paying by the hour, ensure you ask for an estimate of how long it will take.

Academic Consulting charges by the length of the recording, so that you know exactly how much the work will cost up front. For details regarding our prices and procedures, please visit: <http://www.academic-consulting.co.nz/transcription>.

Consider the recording device used

If you're still using the good old-fashioned standard or micro/mini cassette tapes then make a resolution to upgrade. The sound quality of digital Dictaphones make them well worth the investment, and they're not as expensive as you may think. They also have the advantage that you can quickly make back-ups of your recordings and easily deliver them to your transcribers or research assistants.









Our own recommendation would be a recorder in the Olympus range. We use and recommend the Olympus DS-30, DS-40 or DS-50 which range in price from approximately \$350 to \$700. They can be purchased from most electronic stores such as Dick Smith Electronics: <http://www.dse.co.nz>. If you're likely to be interviewing in environments where you are unable to control background noise, we'd recommend avoiding the high-end Dictaphones as they tend to be extremely sensitive – a noise made outside can sometimes sound as clear as the person sitting right next to the Dictaphone.

If you're unsure as to the best recording device to suit your purposes then ask around to see what experienced colleagues have found work well. You might also like to chat to staff at a company that specialises in dictation recording systems. We've found the staff at Sound Business particularly helpful and knowledgeable: <http://www.soundbusiness.co.nz>.

If you're conducting telephone interviews, try to avoid recording via your speakerphone - the sound quality can be extremely variable. Specialised telephone recording devices are relatively inexpensive (between \$30 and \$90). Some of these devices plug into your telephone while others insert into the Dictaphone itself, so consider what will best suit your circumstances.

Recording Tips

It goes without saying that you should always test your recording device before beginning an interview, and also ensure that you have spare batteries to hand. Some other things to keep in mind include:

-  Digital Dictaphones are incredibly sensitive. Avoid rustling papers or drumming fingers near the recording device or moving it once it is turned on.
-  Keep an eye on your recording device during the interview to ensure it is continuing to record.
-  Don't leave mobile phones near a digital Dictaphone. Even on silent, these will interfere with the recording to the point where you may not be able to hear what's been said. Likewise watch for any other electronic equipment near the Dictaphone such as laptops or portable music devices.
-  Try to minimise background noise where at all possible (not an easy task sometimes!). If you have control over the environment, watch out for things such as open windows, noisy air conditioners, radios or music playing, jugs boiling, washing machines running etc.
-  Learn where the pause button is located for your particular Dictaphone model - there's bound to be interruptions that you don't want recorded!
-  Turn off the voice activation feature if your Dictaphone has one. This is notorious for missing precious seconds of what participants have said.
-  Consider the room layout and Dictaphone/microphone position when interviewing groups of people. Inevitably the person with the quietest voice will sit the furthest away from the Dictaphone!
-  Likewise, in individual interview situations, ensure that the Dictaphone is nearer your participant than yourself – it's more important to record what they're saying!

- 🔊 Try to avoid recording outside - the recorder picks up the breeze or air movement as well as all background noise such as traffic, birds etc.
- 🔊 If possible, you may like to have two Dictaphones recording the interview just in case one fails.
- 🔊 If you don't think the recorder will pick up something that a participant has been said (either because it has been said quietly or drowned out by something else) then paraphrase it at the time this occurs. That way you have something recorded, and it gives the participant a chance to add or correct anything they wish.
- 🔊 Once the recorder is turned on, it's usually a bad idea to move it as it makes quite a loud noise that obliterates what's being said if people are talking. If it needs to be moved, where possible, pause the recording and then move it.

During the Interview/Focus Group

The following tips will help both you and the transcriber make sense of your recording later down the track:

- 🔊 Try not to interrupt or talk over your participants. This includes saying things like "uh huh" - it's amazing how much these asides drown out what the participant is saying.
- 🔊 Laughter is particularly bad at distorting what people are saying. Asking participants not to laugh is hardly a good idea, but consider waiting until laughter has subsided before asking your next question.
- 🔊 If possible, encourage speakers to make some verbal reference to things they may be indicating visually (or make this reference yourself).
- 🔊 If references to people, places, websites, organisations etc. are important, keep in mind that the transcriber may not know or be able to easily distinguish these. Unless you're sure of the term/spelling yourself, ask for these to be repeated or even spelt out.
- 🔊 While it helps build rapport to have food and drink present, please be aware that eating and drinking while talking is a sure fire way to drown out what someone is saying.

Specific Advice for Focus Groups

If you wish a transcriber to be able to distinguish between speakers or identify particular voices in a focus group, please keep the following in mind:

- 🔊 Spend at least one minute per person at the beginning of the recording getting participants to introduce themselves. If anonymity is an issue ask them to either "make up" information about themselves, or even talk about their favourite movie or book. The idea is to let them talk for long enough so that the transcriber can pick up the distinguishing characteristics of their voice.

- 🔊 It's a lot harder in a focus group to ensure that everyone is picked up by the recording device. Once participants have introduced themselves, you may like to stop the recording and briefly replay it to check that everyone can be adequately heard. This can be a tricky thing to implement though as many people don't like to hear themselves on tape 😊
- 🔊 If possible, refer to participants by name throughout the discussion and/or ask them to refer to themselves by name as often as they can.
- 🔊 Sometimes a map of where participants are sitting in the group can be useful for the transcriber as transcription software can play participants back on different "channels" depending on their location (note that this depends on the recording device and transcription software used). A map is only useful if people have introduced themselves at the beginning of the recording of course.
- 🔊 There's a much greater likelihood in a focus group of people talking over top of each other, particularly if participants are familiar with each other. At the beginning of the discussion, please encourage people to speak one at a time. If things become "unruly" don't be afraid to stop the discussion and remind everyone that this is important. If necessary, point out that some poor person has to transcribe the file and that people speaking all at once will make this extremely difficult!

Keep in mind that despite best intentions the above tips are not always possible to put into practice. Don't let it throw you off your questioning if outside interruptions, noises etc. do occur – it's all part of the fun of research!

If you'd like to learn more about the transcription service we offer, there is information at: <http://www.academic-consulting.co.nz/transcription>.