Realities Toolkit #08

Transcribing your own data

Hazel Burke, Lisa Jenkins and Victoria Higham
Morgan Centre, University of Manchester

May 2010

1. Introduction

Transcribing your own data takes a long time and it is a task that often seems to pop up in your To Do list at a time when your enthusiasm for your project is at a low ebb. The aim of this toolkit is to help you plan properly for transcribing, and save you time by helping you do your transcribing more efficiently.

This toolkit deals with transcribing your own, or your team's, data. If you are considering sending your data to somebody else or an external transcribing agency, see our toolkit on outsourcing transcribing.

2. Project planning

Every hour's recording will take around four to seven hours to transcribe, depending on your typing skills, the quality of the recording and the complexity of the interview. If you do 40 interviews each lasting one hour, this translates into 160-240 hours transcribing, which means around 23 to 34 days solid typing. This rule of thumb applies if you are transcribing for thematic content analysis; if you are going to analyse your data according to a different methodology (eg conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, linguistic analyses) then transcribing will take longer.

Estimate extra time for transcribing if:

1. Recordings involve more than one participant (eg focus groups)
2. Sound quality of recordings is poor.
3. Recordings involve participants with unfamiliar accents or who speak quickly or not very clearly
4. You type slowly.

As early as possible in your project, estimate how long transcribing will take and mark this time on your project plan. This should help you spot potential scheduling problems before they happen: for example, if you are thinking of doing four extra 90 minute interviews it will take nearly an extra whole week to transcribe them.

Download our quick transcribing planning spreadsheet from
www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits/transcribing-your-data

You may find that the time that you need to allow for transcribing is higher than you thought. (For some reason, the estimated time needed is rarely less than you expect.) If this happens, then it is worth addressing the issue early. You might decide to be selective in the amount of data you transcribe. This might be an appropriate decision for a PhD study but it would not work on a project where other team members needed a complete transcript for analysis. You could try and find funding to outsource some of the transcribing. Or you might decide to reduce the number of interviews you do; this sounds drastic, but remember that running late on transcribing might risk reducing the amount of time you can spend on analysis and writing.

Remember to think about how you will store and archive your files at the planning stage of the project. You will need to fit in with your institution's data storage policy, of course, but you should also check if you have enough disk space/CDs etc to store your transcripts and recordings. Audio files are often much bigger than text documents.

3. Recording tips

Good quality recordings are quicker to transcribe than poor quality ones. These tips will help you start with the best possible recording quality.

1. Even small recorders will often have adjustable settings for recording in different situations. Checking the manual and experimenting with different settings in advance can really help sound quality.
2. Plugging in an external microphone might help.
3. Choose as quiet a location as possible.

Even simple adjustments, like setting the correct recording context, can help a lot

4. In general, you will be most interested in what the interviewee has to say, rather than what you say, so make sure that the recorder is best placed to pick up *their* words clearly. (Again, a few minutes experimenting with the range of your recorder in advance will save a lot of time later.)
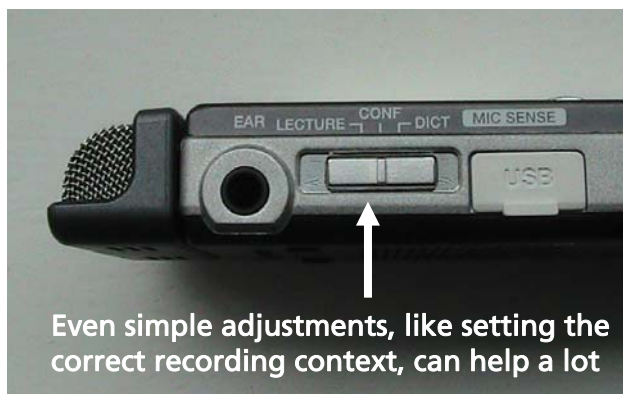
If you like, you can record information about each interview at the beginning of the file by reading it into the recorder before you go to your interview, eg "Leisure Time project, Interview 10, 5 May 2010, Interviewee: Anne-Marie Sheehan"

4. Equipment and software

You can transcribe using a standard media player, but it is *much* quicker to use a foot pedal and transcribing software. These two things will make your life easier and cut transcribing time by a third or a half.

The foot pedal is used to pause, rewind and fast forward the recording quickly without changing the programme you're in or taking your fingers off the keyboard.

Foot pedal with play, pause and rewind
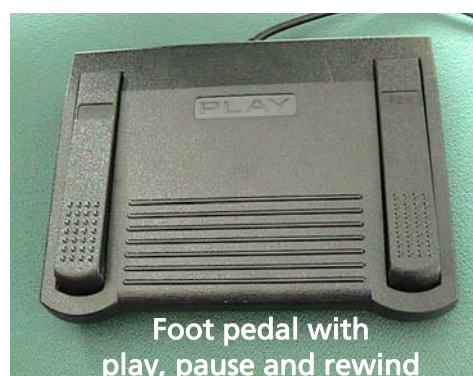
The transcribing software connects with the foot pedal and helps you manage your files. You can usually transcribe straight into a file within the transcription software or in your standard word processing software eg Word.
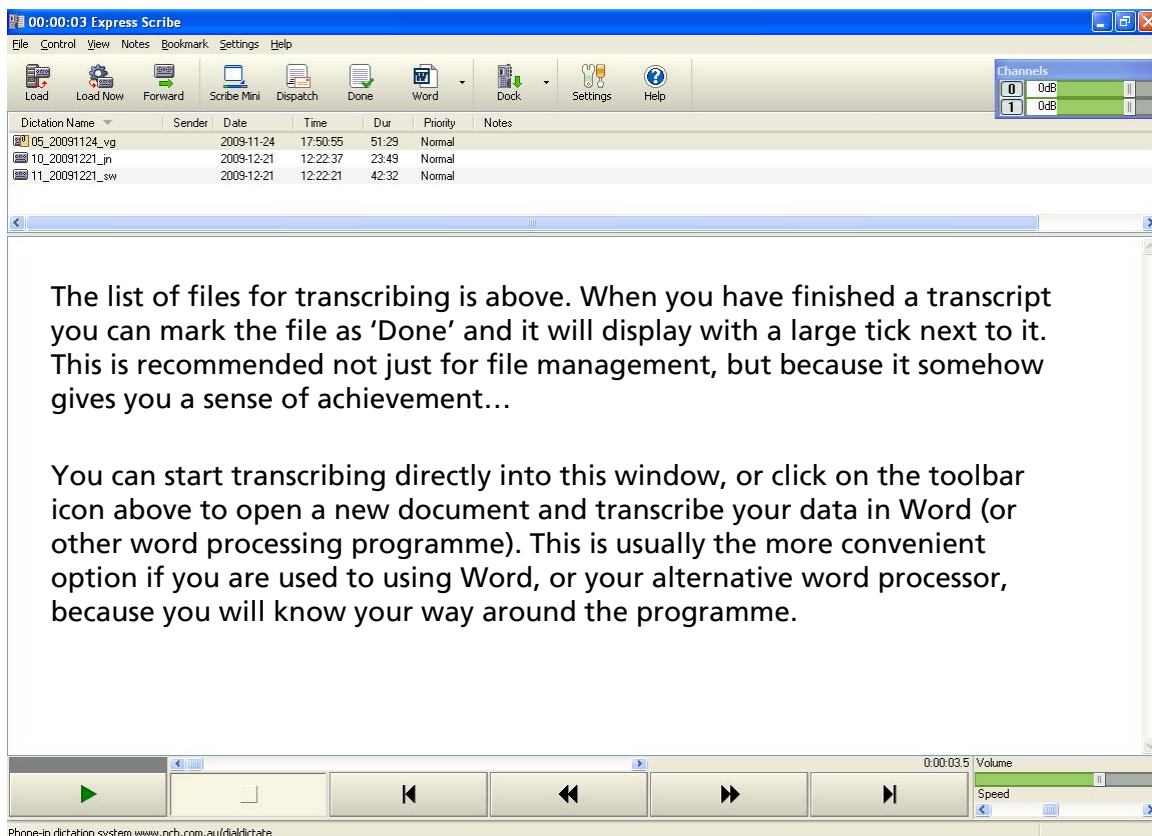
Buying and setting up your equipment

You can buy transcription kits, but the cheapest option is usually to buy the components separately:

1. **Foot pedal** (around £60) – check that:
   a. It works with the file format your recorder produces eg .mp3, .wav
   b. It works with your operating system eg Windows XP, Windows 7, Mac
   c. You can plug it in (most pedals use a USB port)
2. **Software** – we use the free-to-download Express Scribe. There are plenty of free alternatives available - you might like to download a couple and see which you prefer.
3. **Headphones** – you might already have earphones (£0!). Some people prefer DJ-style headphones that go over your whole ear to cut down on background noise (see right), or a typist's headset. If you choose the DJ-style headphones you don't need very expensive ones – you are looking for comfort rather than the ability to transcribe your data in a club. We bought some recently for around £15.

When you have bought your equipment and installed your software you need to set up your foot pedal. Don't worry, this is straightforward. You might get an automatic prompt to do this when you plug your pedal in for the first time, but if not you will usually find a setup wizard in the Settings menu.

The picture below is a screenshot of the Express Scribe software; most software will have similar features.

The list of files for transcribing is above. When you have finished a transcript you can mark the file as 'Done' and it will display with a large tick next to it. This is recommended not just for file management, but because it somehow gives you a sense of achievement…

You can start transcribing directly into this window, or click on the toolbar icon above to open a new document and transcribe your data in Word (or other word processing programme). This is usually the more convenient option if you are used to using Word, or your alternative word processor, because you will know your way around the programme.

Help! My transcript has disappeared!
As soon as you start to transcribe a new file in your word processor, go into File > Save As… and save it with a sensible filename into the folder you want to store your transcripts in, eg `01_charlie.doc` in `c:\Project name\Interviews\transcripts\`

If you don't do this, some transcribing software will save the file into a default folder which can be tricky to find later. Our default filepath is `C:\Documents and Settings\Application Data\NCHSwift\Sound\Express\Current\0000004.doc`. Not an easy filepath to remember…

Getting the most out of your transcribing software

Transcribing software usually has shortcuts to save you time and it is well worth spending a few minutes to find out about these.

Some useful features to look out for are:
- **Audio enhancements** which will attempt to remove background noise on poor quality files (File > Special Audio Processes in Express Scribe)
- **Setting up a template to avoid typing the same header information for each interview** (for instructions on how to do this in Express Scribe, see the Help file entry on 'Working with word processors')

Cutting out the small talk
You will probably find that each recording starts with some small talk and there might be other sections of the recording that you are confident will not be needed in your analysis. One advantage of transcribing your own data is that, as you know the methodology behind your research, you will be able to judge if any sections can safely be left out of your transcript. (You can show this in the transcript if you like eg "Interview starts with discussion of my journey to interviewee's house, the bad weather, and then a discussion of what topics the interview will cover" or "Interviewee's son comes into room and talks to us for a bit about school".) This won't save huge amounts of time but it might allow you to shave a few minutes off each recording.

5. Working comfortably and staying sane!

Make sure that your desk is set up properly: you will be sitting typing for a long time! Adjust your chair to the right height, and make sure the monitor and keyboard are positioned so you can sit comfortably. See http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg36.pdf for advice from the Health and Safety Executive on setting up your workstation.

Take regular breaks to stretch and walk away from the computer. You can install free "screen break" software which will keep track of you typing time for you. (Remember to only download from reputable sources – check with your IT help first if you aren't sure.)

Taking regular breaks
As well as thinking about physical comfort, you will probably find that you are mentally fresher if you can avoid transcribing for hours and hours each day; it can be a tiring process.

6. Formatting tips

Using your word processing software efficiently will save time while you are transcribing. Here are some tips gleaned from transcribing experts.

1. Adding line numbers

Adding line numbers can make it easier to refer to part of your transcript. To do this in Word, put your cursor on the first line of your transcript after the heading, go to File > Page setup > Click on the Layout tab. In the Preview at the bottom of the window, select 'This point forward' from the drop down box and click the 'Line numbers' button, choose your options and click OK.

See our demo video showing how to add line numbers to a transcript in Word at www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits/transcribing-your-data

2. Save As… Rich Text

Saving your file as a Rich Text Format (.rtf) makes it easier to import into other programmes such as Nvivo and Atlas.ti. It is also a preferred format for depositing with many data archives. To do this, select File > Save As… and select Rich Text from the 'Save as type' drop down box.

It is best to keep fancy formatting to a minimum: use a widely available font (like Times New Roman or Arial) and stick to **bold**, *italics* and underlines for emphasis and other formatting.

3. Find and Replace for anonymising data

How and when you anonymise data will depend on your way of working, but many people like to start this process while they are transcribing their data. A quick way of doing simple actions, like replacing real names with pseudonyms is to use the Find and Replace function (Ctrl + F in Word).

Be careful though! If you use this method to search for the real name 'Tom' and change it into the pseudonym 'Mike' the word processor will not replace any instances where 'Tom' is mistyped 'Tpm' which makes the real name obvious. You can also run into problems if you use this function too enthusiastically and end up with 'mikeorrow' when the word should have been left as 'tomorrow'…

> **Anonymisation logs**
> It is a good idea to note down all your changes as you make them. Don't rely on remember which data you have anonymised. We use spreadsheets to record a) real names and places and b) the pseudonyms/ anonymised names.

4. Find and Replace for correcting common words

Another trick using the Find and Replace function is using it to insert frequently-typed words in a completed transcript. For instance, while you are transcribing you can type 'I:' instead of 'Interviewer:' and 'P:' instead of 'Pseudonym:' and then use the Find and Replace function when you have finished your transcript to Find and Replace all your shortcuts with the full names.

If this idea appeals to you and you want to take it a bit further then you might like to research your word processing software's 'automatic text' or 'autocorrect' function using the Help files.

5. Highlighting text for anonymising later

Apart from replacing real names with pseudonyms you might want to mark other data in your transcript to remind you to anonymise, annotate or remove it later. Some people like to mark this information during transcription, though if you are typing quickly you might prefer to do this after you have finished the transcription to avoid breaking your rhythm. You can highlight text in Word using the ==highlighter pen function== or by changing colour (remember to choose a colour that will show up when printed in black and white as well as on screen). If you can't see the highlighter pen icon, go to View > Toolbars > Reviewing to display it.

6. Using heading styles

If you don't already use heading styles in Word, it can be well worth taking a bit of time to investigate them (in Format > Styles and Formatting).

A particular advantage of using heading styles in transcriptions is that you can turn Word headings into codes if you import your transcript into a programme like Nvivo, for instance, if you are doing focus groups and want to code each person's contribution separately. If you want to do this, it is easier to type each person's name on a different line to their words, like this:

> Paul
> So she's not so good with money then?
>
> Rachel
> No, she's a spendaholic that one. Always putting it on the card when she can't really afford it. And she gets into trouble, too you know…

You can either add headings while you type or when you have finished a whole transcript.

A quick way of adding heading styles while you transcribe, you can use shortcut keys: hold down Crtl + Alt and then press 3 to apply Heading 3; Ctrl + Alt + 2 for Heading 2 etc.

You can also turn names into headings in completed transcripts. Go to Edit > Replace (or press Ctrl + F) to bring up the Find and Replace box as below.
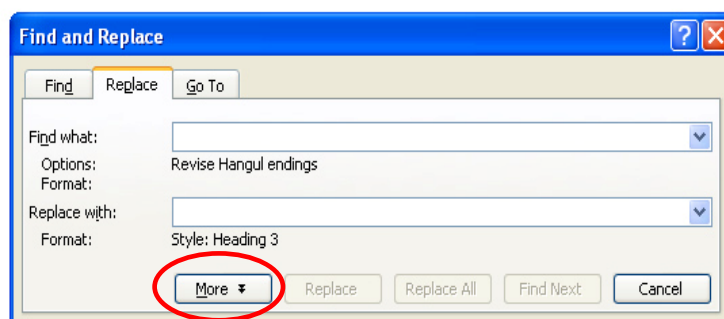
You might need to click on the
"More" button to display the
advanced search options as below.
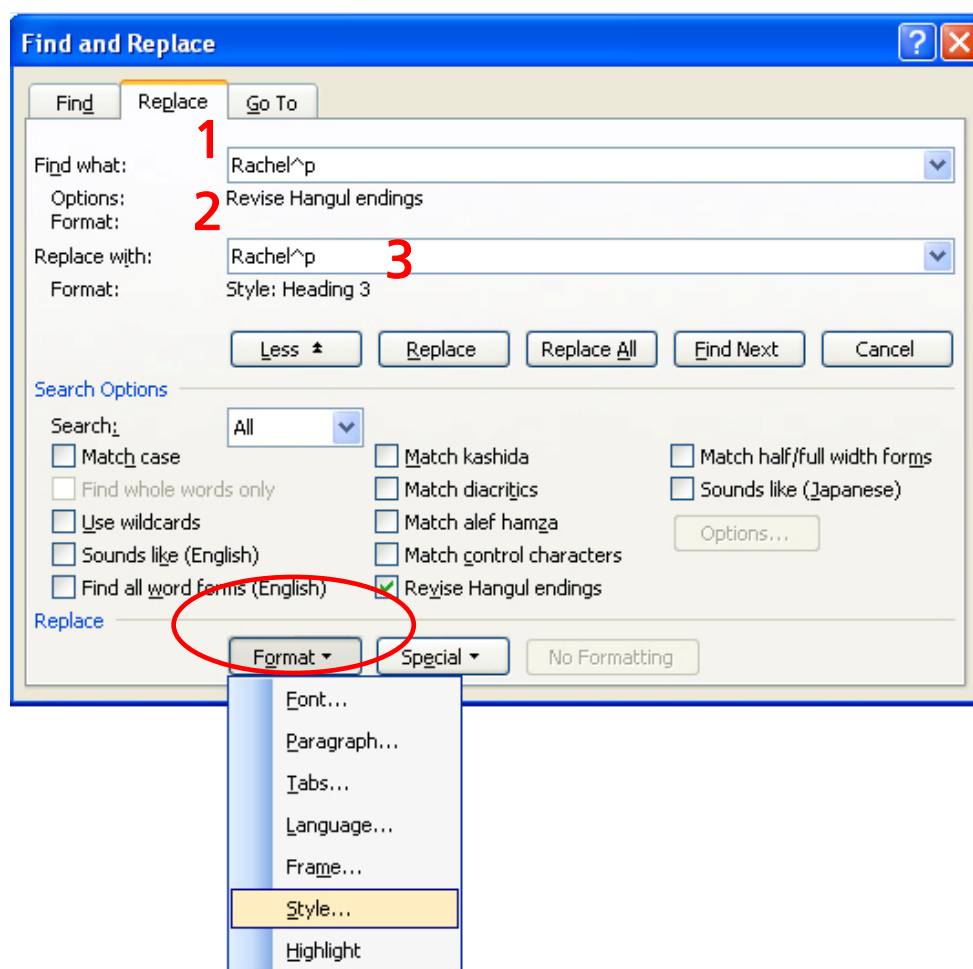
1. Type the name that you want to turn into a heading in the "Find what" and "Replace with" boxes (1 and 2 above)
2. Click in the "Replace with" box, and then click on the "Format" button. When the pop-up menu appears, select "Style" and another little pop-up window will appear. Choose your heading from this list (use the same heading for each person), then click OK to return to the main "Find and Replace" box above.
3. You should see that the "Replace with" box now reads "Style: Heading 3" underneath (3).
4. From here, click "Replace All" and all instances of the word Rachel will have the Heading 3 style applied to them.

If you follow these instructions, *every* instance of the word Rachel will be formatted as **heading 3**. In most cases, this is fine, but where real names come up in conversation you will end up with something like this:

Rachel
Well, I'd probably say I *was* good with money, but my husband might not agree with me on that one. But generally, yes, I am pretty careful.

Paul
Mmm…

Rachel
You know I do try and put a bit away for a rainy day and I don't like putting everything on credit cards – I don't agree with that really. I like to save up and then buy something, not just whack it on the credit card and worry about it later. My

> **sister does that and it drives me round the bend but she always goes "Rachel, life's too short for scrimping and saving and what's the point of making yourself unhappy not having something when you can put it on the card and just pay it off later?"**

The problem above is that the Find and Replace trick has applied a **Heading 3** style to the whole of the last paragraph because Rachel refers to herself by name in it. There are two ways of dealing with this. The first is simply to have a quick check through your transcript after you have done your find and replace and correct these errors.

Alternatively, use a special function that will Find and Replace *just* instances of "Rachel" which are followed by a paragraph break (ie only those which you have added to the transcript to show a new speaker, not names that appear in the actual conversation).
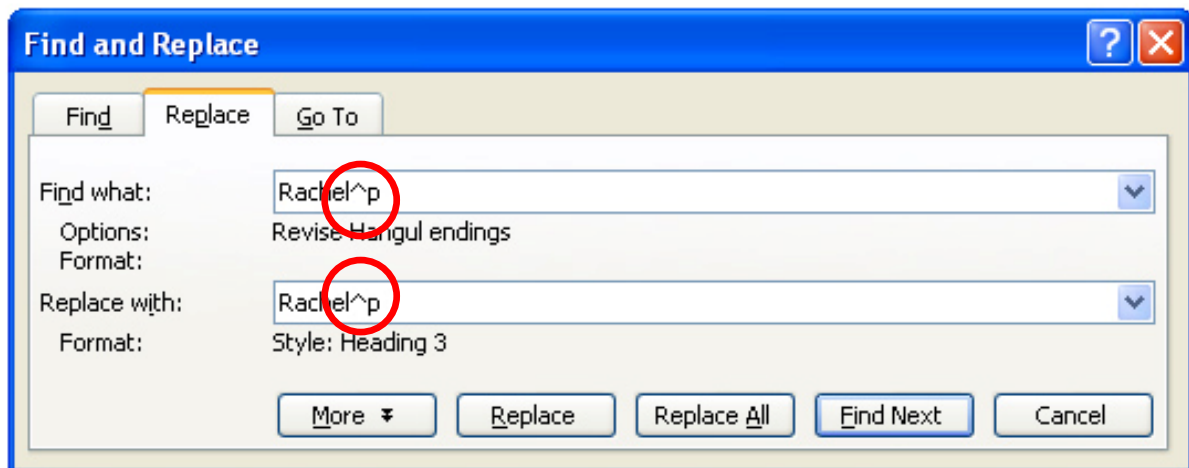
The picture above shows a "Find and Replace" action for only instances where "Rachel" is immediately followed by a paragraph break. To do this, type "^6" after the name you want to apply the heading to (the "^" character is made by pressing Shift + 6). Any instances of "Rachel" that appear in sentences in the conversation will not be changed.

We would like to thank the Realities user panel for their comments and suggestions on this toolkit.

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 and let us know.

Join our **email newslist** for updates on our toolkits, events and other activities: www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/aboutus/newslist

Realities is part of the National Centre for Research Methods, which aims to improve research methods across the UK social science community. We are based in the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester.

Realities, Morgan Centre, Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL
+44 (0) 161 275 0265 | realities@manchester.ac.uk | www.manchester.ac.uk/realities