INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

Transcribing research interviews: *consent, conventions and keeping recordings on your computer.*

A transcript is a written representation of a recorded interview, made so that the conversation can be analysed. It is not a plain copy. Every transcript rests on choices about what to write down, from pauses and laughter to dialect and overlapping talk, and those choices decide what can later be seen in the data, so the methods literature treats transcription as the first stage of analysis rather than clerical work. This guide is for postgraduate students and researchers in the UK transcribing qualitative interviews for a dissertation, thesis or study.

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Priya, the participant quoted below, is fictional, and her words were written to show the conventions. The data protection points summarise the Information Commissioner's Office guidance on the UK GDPR as we read it on 10 October 2026; they are not legal advice.

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

What a transcript is for in qualitative research

A transcript stands in for the interview during analysis. You will read it far more often than you listen to the recording, so whatever it leaves out tends to stay out of the findings. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) describe transcription as interpretive from the first keystroke: how to write a pause, whether to keep a false start and where to put a full stop are analytic decisions. Davidson (2009) adds that they should be made deliberately, recorded and reported.

BEFORE YOU RECORD

Consent and ethics: what participants need to know before the recorder is on

Consent to be interviewed is not consent to be recorded, transcribed and quoted. The information sheet and consent form should say what will happen to the recording. Participants should be told:

- **That the interview will be recorded and transcribed, and by whom:** you, a named transcriber under a confidentiality agreement, or software, on your computer or on a company's servers.
- **Who will hear or process the audio,** that identifying details will be replaced with a pseudonym, and whether quotations will appear in the write-up.
- **Where the recording and transcript will be stored** and for how long, when the audio will be deleted, and how to withdraw and until when.

Sending the audio anywhere is a disclosure

Uploading a recording to a transcription service, a cloud tool or a meeting platform's transcription feature discloses the participant's voice and words to a third party. The consent form, the data management plan and the ethics application should all name the route the audio will take. If they say only the research team will hear it, ask for an amendment before any audio is uploaded.

What to check with your university's data protection office

For a student or staff project the university is normally the data controller, so ask its data protection office, before you design the consent form:

- Which lawful basis it relies on for research. Many UK universities use public task and treat consent as an ethical requirement rather than the legal basis, which changes what the information sheet must say.
- Which condition it relies on for special category data, whether a transcription service or transcriber is an approved supplier with a data processing agreement, and which storage locations and retention periods apply.

The UK GDPR principles, in plain words

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) lists seven principles. Five do most of the work for interview recordings; the other two are accuracy and accountability.

PRINCIPLE	WHAT IT ASKS	FOR YOUR RECORDINGS
Lawfulness, fairness and transparency	A lawful basis, and clear information.	The information sheet says who will hear the audio and where it will be kept.
Purpose limitation	Only the stated purpose.	No reuse for another project or for teaching unless consent covers it.
Data minimisation	Only what you need.	No video when audio will do; no raw audio kept longer than the method needs.
Storage limitation	No longer than necessary, with the period justified.	Audio and the key are deleted at the points your plan sets.
Integrity and confidentiality (security)	Protection against unauthorised access, loss or damage.	Encrypted devices, approved storage, the key apart from the transcripts, no audio in email.

Special category data

The UK GDPR gives extra protection to data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs or trade union membership, to data concerning health, sex life or sexual orientation, and to genetic and biometric data. Interviews about illness, mental health, sexuality, faith, ethnicity or politics are special category data, and the ICO notes that the categories are framed broadly, so an interview about returning to work after sick leave is likely to be health data even if the illness is never named. Such data needs a separate condition under Article 9, usually the research condition in the Data Protection Act 2018 or explicit consent.

THREE ROUTES

Where transcription happens, and why it matters

A recording can become text in three places, and the choice affects confidentiality first.

On your own computer

You type it, or software on the computer drafts it; no one else hears the recording.

A human transcriber

A named person hears the audio under a confidentiality agreement and, where required, a data processing agreement.

A cloud service

The audio goes to a company's servers: a disclosure to a third party that your consent form and ethics approval must cover.

Questions to ask before using any service

- Where is the audio processed and stored, and is any of that outside the UK?
- How long are the audio and the transcript kept, and can you delete both?
- Are uploaded recordings used to train or improve the provider's models?
- Is the service named in your consent form, data management plan and ethics application?

ROUTE	CONFIDENTIALITY	COST	SPEED	ACCURACY	WHO CHECKS IT
You, typing on your own computer	Highest. No one else hears the audio.	Your time: several hours per recorded hour.	Slow	As good as your hearing and attention.	You, against the recording
Software on your own computer	High, if the software processes the audio there.	The software, plus checking time.	Fast	Depends on audio quality, accents and vocabulary; names suffer most.	You, line by line, listening back.
A human transcriber	Good, under a confidentiality agreement and secure transfer.	Paid by the audio minute or hour.	Days to weeks	Good with clear audio; names and terms still need correcting.	You, against the recording
A cloud service	Lowest. The audio leaves your control.	A subscription, or free in exchange for data or limits.	Fast	Depends on audio quality, accents and vocabulary.	You, line by line, listening back.

WRITING THE TALK DOWN

Transcription conventions: deciding what to write down

A **verbatim** transcript keeps every word as spoken, with false starts, repetitions, fillers, pauses, laughter and other sounds. An **intelligent verbatim** transcript keeps the words that carry meaning, removes fillers, false starts and repetitions, and tidies the grammar lightly. Bucholtz (2000) calls the second kind naturalised, because it moves talk towards written norms, and the first denaturalised. Neither is neutral. The choice should follow from your method, be written down as a set of conventions, and be applied to every transcript (Poland, 1995).

What different methods need

METHOD	WHAT THE TRANSCRIPT KEEPS	WHY
Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Full verbatim: pauses, laughter, false starts, emphasis and hesitation.	Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) ask for all the words, false starts included, with significant pauses and laughter noted, but not the prosodic detail of conversation analysis (see the IPA step-by-step guide).
Conversation analysis, discourse analysis and narrative methods	Verbatim with timed pauses, overlap, intonation and stress, usually in Jefferson notation.	The analysis is of the talk itself.
Reflexive thematic analysis	Orthographic transcription: all the words, plus laughter, pauses and emphasis.	Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend a simple notation for the words and the features of delivery that matter for meaning (see the reflexive thematic analysis guide).
Framework analysis and other applied approaches	Often intelligent verbatim.	The interest is in what was said about the framework's topics.

A short notation, with examples

Whichever notation you use, write it out as a key at the front of each transcript and keep to it.

FEATURE	MARK	EXAMPLE
Short pause	**(.)**	The first week (.) it was hard.
Timed pause, in seconds	**(2.0)**	I just wanted (2.0) I wanted it.
Laughter and other sounds	**((laughs)) ((sighs))**	Which they couldn’t. ((laughs))
Emphasis	**Underline, or italics**	I wanted it to be normal.
Cut-off word or false start	**A hyphen at the break**	I wa- I kept thinking.
Inaudible passage	**[inaudible 00:14:22, 3 s]**	She said [inaudible 00:14:22, 3 s].
Overlapping talk	**[at the start of each stretch**	Int: [Could tell / Priya: [That I’d been off.
Identifying detail replaced	**[description in brackets]**	At [large teaching hospital].

Four fictional lines, transcribed verbatim

LINE	TIME	SPEAKER	TALK
41	00:14:02	INT	Can you tell me about the first week back at work?
42	00:14:06	PRIYA	The first week (.) it was, I wa- I kept thinking everyone could tell. ((laughs)) Which they couldn't, obviously.
43	00:14:15	INT	[Could tell
44	00:14:15	PRIYA	[That I'd been off. That something had happened. My manager was lovely but she kept saying "take your time" and I just wanted (2.0) I wanted it to be normal.

Priya is fictional, written for this guide; the lines, timings and story are invented.

In intelligent verbatim, line 42 would read "The first week, I kept thinking everyone could tell. Which they couldn't, obviously." Easier to read, and it says the same thing, but the false start, the laugh and the pause are gone. For a framework analysis that may not matter; for IPA it removes what the linguistic notes work on.

Line numbers, timestamps and speaker labels

- **Number the lines or the turns,** so that you can cite "lines 42 to 44" in an analysis table, and timestamp every turn so that you can return to the recording. Line numbers move when text reflows, so keep one numbered master copy.
- **Label speakers consistently.** "Int" for the interviewer is common. Give the participant their pseudonym from the first draft rather than "P" or "Participant 3"; a name keeps a person in view.
- **Mark what you could not hear,** with a timestamp and a length, and put a question mark on uncertain hearings; never guess silently. Where two people speak at once, open a square bracket at the start of each overlapping stretch.

LISTENING BACK

Checking a draft transcript against the recording

Whoever or whatever produced the draft, check it by listening to the whole recording with the transcript in front of you, not to a sample. Poland (1995) shows how small slips change meaning: a full stop in the wrong place splits one thought in two, a misheard word reverses a claim, and a tidied sentence loses the hesitation that showed the participant was unsure.

What to listen for

- **Misheard words,** especially words that sound alike. A fluent sentence in a draft of halting speech is a warning.
- **Names and places,** which software guesses and a transcriber does not know. Correct them and note each for pseudonymisation.
- **Numbers and negatives.** “Fifteen” and “fifty”, “can” and “can’t”: short, often quiet, and they reverse the sense.
- **Dialect and non-standard grammar,** kept as spoken. Changing “we was” to “we were” misrepresents the speaker and, as Bucholtz (2000) argues, makes a political choice about whose speech counts as correct.

Correcting is not tidying

Correcting makes the transcript match what was said. Tidying changes what was said so that it reads better. The first is always right; the second is a transcription decision that belongs in your written conventions, not something done quietly while checking. Punctuation is yours, not the speaker’s: put it where the voice falls. Check the speaker label at every change of turn, and log the passages that stayed inaudible.

PROTECTING THE PERSON

Pseudonymisation: names, places and what cannot be hidden

Pseudonymisation replaces the details that identify a person and keeps the link between the two somewhere else. Under the UK GDPR, pseudonymised data is still personal data, because the link exists; anonymised data is data from which no one can be identified by any means reasonably likely to be used. Be honest in your consent form about which you are promising.

Pseudonyms, the key and the text

- Choose names that fit the person, or let them choose, and avoid the real names of other participants and of people in their story.
- Write the real name, the pseudonym and the interview date in one key and nowhere else. The key is the additional information that would re-identify the person, and the UK GDPR expects it to be kept separately and protected: encrypted, in an approved location, apart from the transcripts and the audio, with a date set for its deletion.
- Replace identifying detail in the text with a bracketed description that keeps what the analysis needs: “[large teaching hospital]”, “[town in the north-east]”, “[her son’s name]”, and log each substitution so that it is applied consistently.

What cannot be made anonymous

A voice recording identifies its speaker by its nature. A distinctive life story, a rare role, a small team or a village can identify a person to anyone who knows them. Where the sample is small or the setting known, say so in the consent form rather than promising anonymity you cannot deliver. If you use QualBuddy, speakers are named once and pseudonyms are applied to its exports; like any tool it does not make a transcript anonymous, as the data and privacy information says.

KEEPING IT SAFE

Storage, retention and backups

Recordings, transcripts and the pseudonym key are three different risks and should live in three different places, each named in your data management plan and approved by your university.

- **Encrypt the device:** full-disk encryption on your laptop (FileVault on a Mac, BitLocker on Windows) and an encrypted external drive for any copy.
- **Use approved locations:** university-managed storage approved for research data, not a personal cloud account, phone or memory stick. Move the audio off the recorder on the day and delete it there, and never send audio by email or a messaging app.
- **Separate the three.** Someone who finds the transcripts should not also find the names.

Retention and deletion

The UK GDPR sets no fixed retention periods; the ICO's guidance on storage limitation asks you to decide how long you need identifiable data, to justify it and to write it down. For a student or funded project the period is set by the institution and the funder, and the data management plan records it. Audio is commonly deleted once the transcripts have been checked or when the study ends, unless the method needs the voice during analysis, as IPA does. Some funders expect data of long-term value to be preserved and, where constraints allow, shared. When the period ends, delete every copy, including backups, the recorder, the transcriber's copy and any version history a storage service keeps.

What synchronised folders do

A synchronised folder copies whatever is put in it to the provider's servers and to every device signed in to the account, and usually keeps deleted files and earlier versions for a time. A university-managed service is covered by its contract; a personal account is not. Software that processes a recording on your computer changes none of this: where you save the file decides who can reach it.

SOFTWARE DRAFTS

Automatic speech recognition: what it gets wrong, and what “local” means

Automatic speech recognition turns speech into text with a machine-learning model. The draft it produces is not the transcript. Names, specialist terms, overlapping talk, quiet or distant speakers and accents unlike those the model was trained on are where it fails most; it also smooths false starts and fillers away, guesses the punctuation, “corrects” non-standard grammar, and sometimes writes words where there was only noise or silence.

Every automatic transcript therefore needs listening back in full, with particular care at names, numbers, negatives and anywhere the text reads more fluently than the speaker. Automatic speaker labelling groups similar voices: it is most reliable with an interviewer and one participant, it struggles with overlap, and it does not establish who anyone is, so check every label against the recording.

“Local” describes where the processing happens: on your computer rather than on a company’s servers. That matters for confidentiality. It says nothing about how much checking the output needs. A local transcript has the same misheard names as any other, and needs the same listening back and the same pseudonymisation. We give no accuracy figure, because it depends on the recording, the speakers’ accents and the vocabulary of the conversation.

KEEP THIS BESIDE YOUR RECORDER

The checklist

Before the interview

- [ ] Consent form names recording, transcription route, storage and deletion
- [ ] Plan and ethics approval cover where the audio goes
- [ ] Lawful basis and special category condition confirmed
- [ ] Conventions written as a key

During the interview

- [ ] Recorder nearer the participant than you
- [ ] Pause offered if asked
- [ ] Audio moved to approved storage that day, then deleted from the recorder

Transcribing

- [ ] One set of conventions for every transcript
- [ ] Line or turn numbers and timestamps
- [ ] Pseudonym as the speaker label
- [ ] Inaudible passages marked, never guessed

Checking

- [ ] Whole recording listened to with the transcript
- [ ] Names, numbers and negatives checked
- [ ] Dialect kept as spoken; corrected, not tidied
- [ ] Speaker labels checked at every turn

Storing

- [ ] Audio, transcripts and key in three places
- [ ] Key encrypted and separate
- [ ] No audio in email, chat or personal synchronisation
- [ ] Every copy deleted when the period ends

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Common questions about transcribing interviews

Can I use a free online transcription tool for my dissertation interviews?

Only if your ethics approval and consent form cover sending the audio to that named service, and most do not. Uploading a recording discloses the participant's voice and words to a company, which may keep the file, process it outside the UK or use it to improve its systems. Transcribe on your own computer, use a transcriber your university has approved, or ask for an amendment that names the service first.

How accurate is automatic transcription?

There is no fixed figure. It depends on the recording quality, the microphone's distance from each speaker, accents and dialects, overlapping talk, and how many names and specialist terms the conversation uses. Whatever the draft looks like, listen back to all of it.

Do I have to transcribe every interview in full?

For IPA and reflexive thematic analysis, yes: both work from the whole account, and what you did not expect is often in the parts you would have skipped. Selective transcription against a framework is a methodological decision to state and justify, and the untranscribed audio is still personal data.

Should I send transcripts back to participants to check?

Not unless your protocol says so. Returning transcripts needs a secure way to send them, a plan for what happens if a participant wants words removed, and some sensitivity to how people feel on seeing their own speech written down.

When should I delete the recordings?

When your data management plan and ethics approval say, usually once the transcripts have been checked or when the study ends. If your method needs the voice during analysis, as IPA does, keep the audio until the analysis is complete. Deleting means every copy, including backups and the recorder.

References

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