



10 Common Pitfalls in Transcription and How to Avoid Them

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Introduction

Transcription is the process of converting spoken language into written text and is a critical task in various fields. There can be many challenges to doing successful transcription and errors in transcription can lead to misinterpretation, loss of critical information, and sometimes even legal consequences. This article explores ten common pitfalls in transcription and provides strategies to avoid them.

10 Common Pitfalls and Avoidance Strategies

1. Mishearing Words or Phrases - One of the most common pitfalls in transcription is mishearing words or phrases, especially when the audio quality is poor or the speaker has an accent. Mishearing can lead to significant errors in the transcribed text, altering the meaning of the content. Contextual understanding in transcription is vital as mishearing can often be corrected by understanding the broader context of the conversation.

- **How to Avoid:**
 - Use high-quality audio equipment to record clear audio.
 - Familiarize yourself with the speaker's accent or dialect before transcribing.
 - Utilize transcription software with

speech recognition capabilities to assist in identifying unclear words.¹

2. Omitting Important Details - Transcribers may accidentally omit critical details, such as pauses, tone, or non-verbal cues, which can convey essential information about the speaker's intent or emotions. It is important to capture non-verbal cues in qualitative research, as these details can provide deeper insights into the participant's responses.

- **How to Avoid:**
 - Include timestamps to mark pauses or significant non-verbal cues.
 - Use brackets to note tone, laughter, or other auditory cues (e.g., [laughs] or [sarcastic tone]).
 - Review the transcript multiple times to ensure no details are missed.²

3. Overlooking Contextual Understanding - Transcription requires more than just typing what is heard. It demands an understanding of the context in which the conversation occurs. Without contextual knowledge, transcribers may misinterpret jargon, idioms, or culturally specific references. Contextual understanding is crucial, especially in ethnographic research, as misinterpretation of cultural references can lead to inaccurate conclusions.³

- **How to Avoid:**
 - Research the subject matter before

¹ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners.

² Poland, B. D. (1995). Transcription quality as an aspect of rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 1(3), 290-310.

³ Tilley, S. (2003). Transcription work: Learning through coparticipation in research practices. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(6), 835-851.

transcribing to familiarize yourself with relevant terminology.

- Consult with the speaker or subject matter experts to clarify ambiguous terms.
- Use footnotes to explain jargon or culturally specific references.

4. Inconsistent Formatting - Inconsistent formatting, such as varying punctuation, capitalization, or paragraph structure, can make a transcript difficult to read and analyze. It is important to use standardized formatting in transcription to ensure clarity and accuracy in records.

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Establish a style guide for transcription, including rules for punctuation, capitalization, and paragraph breaks.
- Use transcription software with built-in formatting tools to maintain consistency.
- Proofread the transcript to ensure adherence to the style guide.⁴

5. Ignoring Speaker Identification - In multi-speaker recordings, failing to identify speakers correctly can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of the transcript. Accurate speaker identification is essential in focus group transcription to attribute responses correctly and maintain the integrity of the data.

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Label each speaker clearly (e.g., Speaker 1, Speaker 2) and consistently throughout the transcript.
- Use timestamps to mark speaker changes.
- If possible, obtain a list of participants and their roles before transcribing.⁵

6. Over-Reliance on Automated Tools - While automated transcription tools can save time, they are not infallible. Over-reliance on these tools can result in errors, particularly with complex terminology or poor audio quality. While automated transcription tools are useful, they often require significant manual correction, especially in specialized fields.

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Use automated tools as a starting point, but always review and edit the output manually.
- Combine automated transcription with human oversight to ensure accuracy.
- Test multiple transcription tools to identify the most accurate one for your needs.

7. Failing to Proofread - Skipping the proofreading step can result in undetected errors, such as typos, grammatical mistakes, or incorrect word

⁴ MacLean, L. M., Meyer, M., & Estable, A. (2004). Improving accuracy of transcripts in qualitative research. *Qualitative health research, 14*(1), 113-123.

⁵ Oliver, D. G., Serovich, J. M., & Mason, T. L. (2005). Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research. *Social forces, 84*(2), 1273-1289.

usage. Proofreading in qualitative research transcription helps to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data.⁶

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Allocate sufficient time for proofreading after completing the transcription.
- Use spell-check and grammar-check tools, but do not rely solely on them.
- Have a second person review the transcript for errors.

8. Misinterpreting Homophones —

Homophones, words that sound the same but have different meanings, can lead to errors in transcription if not carefully reviewed.

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Pay close attention to context when transcribing homophones.
- Use a dictionary or online resource to verify the correct spelling and meaning of ambiguous words.
- Highlight potential homophone errors during proofreading.⁷

9. Inadequate Time Management -

Transcription is a time-consuming process, and poor time management can lead to rushed work and increased errors. Effective time management strategies for qualitative researchers can help ensure high-quality transcription without compromising accuracy.⁸

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Break the transcription task into manageable segments.
- Set realistic deadlines and allocate sufficient time for each segment.
- Use time-tracking tools to monitor progress and avoid last-minute rushes.

10. Ethical and Privacy Concerns -

Transcription often involves sensitive information, and failing to address ethical and privacy concerns can have serious consequences. Ethical considerations in transcription are critical, particularly in research involving vulnerable populations.⁹

▪ **How to Avoid:**

- Obtain informed consent from participants before recording and transcribing.
- Anonymize sensitive information, such as names and locations, in the transcript.
- Store transcripts securely and comply with data protection regulations.

Conclusion

Transcription is a complex and nuanced process that requires attention to detail, contextual understanding, and adherence to

⁶ Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2018). Doing interviews.

⁷ Dressler, R. A., & Kreuz, R. J. (2000). Transcribing oral discourse: A survey and a model system. *Discourse Processes*, 29(1), 25-36.

⁸ Gibbs, G. R. (2007). *Analyzing qualitative data*. Sage.

⁹ Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J., & Kitzinger, C. (2015). Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice. *Qualitative research*, 15(5), 616-632.

ethical standards. By recognizing and addressing these ten common pitfalls, transcribers can produce accurate, reliable, and meaningful transcripts. Avoiding these

errors is essential for maintaining the integrity of the transcribed content.



Take Away

This article discusses common pitfalls in transcription and ways to avoid them. Ultimately, the goal of transcription is to capture the spoken word in written form, preserving the original message for future reference and analysis. By following best practices, transcribers can achieve this goal and contribute to the success of their respective fields.

About the Author

Manpreet Kaur, MA. Qualitative Data Analyst at Elite Research, brings extensive experience in qualitative research methods, coding, and analysis. With expertise in project management and data analysis, she enhances understanding across diverse domains. Collaborating with researchers, organizations, and communities, she shapes qualitative research using techniques like interviews and focus groups. Holding Masters degrees in Sociology and Medical Anthropology from Case Western Reserve University, she's dedicated to applying social science research to address global issues in modern day society. In her role, she ensures accurate data analysis, contributing to community and organizational development and advancement.



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