

HOW TO HOST A *BY THE PEOPLE* TRANSCRIBE-A-THON

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This is a guide for how (and why) to run a *By the People* transcribing event, which we generally call transcribe-a-thons or transcribing parties.

A transcribe-a-thon can be...

- A scheduled time where people transcribe, review or tag documents together on the *By the People* website (crowd.loc.gov).
- People working together in-person, online, or a mix of both.
- Focused on a specific topic, such as women's history or the U.S. Civil War; *By the People* Campaign; or task such as reviewing or tagging.
- A way to give newcomers an insight into how *By the People* works.
- A connection between your institution, local area, or area of interest to materials held at the Library of Congress and available through *By the People*.

Why host a transcribe-a-thon?

- Connect to history and primary source documents
- Build skills reading and interpreting handwriting
- Builds relationships in the community
- Learn from each other and by working together
- Introduce new people to *By the People* and help them contribute
- Transcriptions from *By the People* will be published on the Library's website (loc.gov) and make documents searchable and legible for many people, including those who are visually or cognitively impaired
- It's fun!

If you're another cultural heritage institution we encourage you to use an event to connect the people, topics, and experience of *By the People* back to your organization and community.

By the People supporting documentation for transcription events is available on the [Resources](#) page, including:

- How to host a transcribe-a-thon document (this PDF!)
- Instruction quick tips handout (PDF)
- "Getting started" presentation (PowerPoint)

PLANNING YOUR EVENT

Try out *By the People*! You'll only be able to plan and lead a successful *By the People* event if you're at least a little familiar with the website, project goals, and the campaigns or material you will be focused on. The best way to get started is to create an account so you can try the full range of activities, including transcribing, reviewing, and tagging. An account will also allow you to see all of your activity under your profile. If you choose to work with handwritten material, spend time getting accustomed to the writing of your chosen campaign subject or subjects. Participants may have common questions about period handwriting, for example the long s form that resembles a lower case f.

Define your goals for the event. What do you or your organization hope to gain from the event and what do you hope volunteers will take away? Decide if the event will focus on a specific topic or activity. Research local/community relevance and any other context you want to provide participants about your goals and reasons for contributing.

In addition to this “How To”, the *By the People* [Resources](#) page provides a handout of Instructions “Quick Tips” (PDF) and a “Getting Started” presentation template (PowerPoint) you can use to orient your participants. Familiarize yourself with these resources and modify them for your needs.

Time

A transcription event could be anywhere from an hour to an entire day. We recommend 2-3 hours, which allows time for introductory information, group activity, and independent work.

Space

Find out how many people your space can hold and limit the number of attendees. Alternatively, guess how many attendees you'll have and try to find a venue that will accommodate that many. It's simple with half a dozen participants, while hundreds could also be successful given the right planning.

If not in a computer lab, you will want a space with tables and chairs. You may want to configure these in clusters to encourage conversation and aid participants in working together.

Internet access

By the People is a web-based project so participants must have reliable access to the internet, preferably strong Wi-Fi or a wired connection. If the Wi-Fi requires a password, make sure it is easily available to attendees.

Computers

If the venue has computers, consider if accounts/passwords are needed to access the computers. If you cannot provide computers, make sure to let participants know to bring their own devices. If laptops or tablets will be used, make sure power is easily available for charging.

By the People is not optimized for use on Internet Explorer but works well on modern browsers. It is most comfortable for most people to transcribe with a keyboard and mouse rather than on a mobile phone or tablet.

User accounts

You do not need an account to transcribe. However, with an account participants will also be able to review the transcriptions of others and create tags. From the profile page, registered users can also track their activity.

You can do one or more of the following:

- Focus participants who cannot or do not want to register to focus on transcription
- Encourage participants to create an account before they arrive
- Walk participants through how to register as part of your introduction

Getting participants

If your event is public, you will need to provide a way for people to find details (and sign up to attend, if necessary). To gather participants, you can try:

- Posting on social media
- Sending an email, if you share with audiences in that way
- Sharing on the *By the People* public discussion forum History Hub (history.gov)
- Partnering with other organizations interested in history or public service to share the event
- Email details to *By the People* community managers at crowd@loc.gov and we can share it too!

Let us know about your event! If you [contact the *By the People* team](#), we can share it in our communication channels. We're also eager to hear feedback about what did and didn't work for your group. We'd also love to share your success: gather data about attendees, work accomplished, and photos (with permission) that we can share with our volunteer network! (History Hub and the newsletter are a great way to find experienced volunteers who may want to participate and help out) Finally, we'd love to send you some *By the People* goodies to give away at your event, such as postcards and bookmarks

Refreshments

If you can provide them, snacks and drinks will encourage people to stick around for longer than they might otherwise and provide an opportunity to take a break and talk with other participants. At a minimum, make sure water is available.

DURING THE EVENT

Welcoming

Welcome people, help them find them a seat, and point out restrooms and exits.

Jot down the numbers of not started and completed items in the campaigns you'll work on so you can track your progress.

Unless everyone knows each other or there are dozens, you can start with a round of introductions. In addition to names, ask people to identify their level of experience (if any) with transcription and *By the People*. Nametags may be helpful. Make sure to identify experienced transcribers or other helpers during your intro.

Introducing

You will likely want to open the event by

- Presenting an overview of the goals of the event and *By the People*. We recommend using or modifying the "Getting Started" presentation available from our [Resources](#) page.
- Demonstrating how to navigate the site, find pages to work on, use the transcription interface, and view instructions and help section.
- Walking through instructions for transcription

More helpful content and context:

- The *By the People* site includes links to timelines, essays, blogs, and more for those may wish to further familiarize themselves with the subject of a Campaign before they start, while transcribing, or perhaps after the event.
- Teaching resources are available on the [For Educators](#) page.
- It can also be helpful to see a cursive alphabet as you transcribe handwritten materials. Here is a Creative Commons licensed version for printing or sharing digitally:
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cursive.svg>

Practicing

After presenting the above information, we recommend a group exercise. Try reviewing as short page together as a group. What was done correctly; what edits are needed; what gray areas can you talk through together? Review is a nice entry point as it removes needing to start a transcription from scratch, which can be intimidating.

Settling in

Have the participants split into pairs or small groups to do a few more reviews before working on their own. If many of the participants are already practiced volunteers, you may want to split up the group and let the experienced users dive straight into activity after introductions or invite them to partner with less experienced participants for 20 minutes or so. This is a good option if you have a large turn out and few organizers.

Work to fight intimidation. Make sure participants know they can choose what seems easy or interesting to them. They should pick what looks good! Don't be afraid to start a page even if you can't finish it. Just make sure to hit "Save" before finding a new page. If anyone sees an unappealing page they can use the "Find a new page" function as often as they like!

After some small group activity, you may want to see if people want to split into clusters by their interest in specific topics or forms of activity. For example one group could review and another transcribe, or one could work on diaries and another on letters. If the workstations are mobile, have the groups physically move to sit together. These sub-communities can then support each other in those specific areas of interest or activity, sharing information, findings, or tips as they delve into the materials.

Don't forget to take some photos! Even just one group photo at the end would be greatly appreciated. Please check that those being photographed are happy to have their photo taken and shared with the Library of Congress and on social media.

Sharing

Encourage conversation and sharing of especially interesting or challenging pages. Talk through the gray areas of interpreting handwriting and text together. You've gathered for this event not just to type, but to form a community, if only for today, that will learn and grow together!

If your transcribe-a-thon is also happening in distributed locations through online participation, try to have a real-time discussion where people can ask questions and chat such as a webinar chat space.

Please note that History Hub is a moderated discussion space and relies on *By the People* community managers to read and post all messages, so it is not a good place for real-time discussion

Tweet about your event if you have access to twitter and please @Crowd_LOC!

Screen Breaks

It's important for everyone to rest their eyes and stop looking at screens for 5 or 10 minutes once an hour. Schedule mini breaks, and encourage everyone to stretch their legs, chat to a neighbor, or if online, to take a break wherever they are and step away from the computer.

Wrapping up

Thank everyone who attended, especially anyone else who helped organize the event!

Make sure new volunteers know that they can keep contributing to *By the People* after the event and where they can reach Community Managers and the wider volunteer community.

Give out *By the People* swag! If you contact us before your event, we're happy to send you some fun stuff to give participants.

If you have another event planned for the future then make sure you announce it before people start to leave.

Jot down the numbers of not started and completed items in the campaigns you worked on. Hopefully you did this before the event started as well so you could track your progress and contributions. (Of course you can't know if other people weren't also working on the site at the same time, but there will likely be an unusual jump in activity that could only be attributed to your event). We will happily share these numbers and thank your organization via our communication channels.

AFTER THE EVENT

[Contact *By the People*](#) to let us know about your event and how it went. If it's okay with you we can share your photos and recognize your work through one or more of your communication channels. We're also eager to get your feedback on this documentation – what worked or didn't? What other activities or introductions did you try that others might want to know about?

Notes

The organization of these instructions and transcribe-a-thon events was modeled on Wikipedia edit-a-thons and their excellent "[How to host an edit-a-thon](#)" documentation. Thank you to all Wikipedians contributed to them.

Our gratitude to DC Public Library for helping pilot these instructions with a Mary Church Terrell transcribe-a-thon on January 21, 2019