



Anonymisation Guidelines

(Version 5, February 2008.)

The purpose of anonymisation is to ensure that the confidentiality, privacy, and good name of interviewees, or of any other named parties or individuals, are not violated in any public presentation of archived data.

This document provides guidelines based on previous experience with archiving qualitative data.¹ However, no anonymisation procedure should be treated as an absolute rule, since the nature, type and extent of anonymisation required will depend on a range of project-specific issues, including the research topic, consent secured, and so on. In general, the guidelines refer to the anonymisation of textual data, such as interview transcripts or field notes. However, care must also be taken to ensure that confidentiality and privacy are preserved when archiving data in other formats, including where multiple forms of data are available for particular individuals, groups or organizations.

The key to success is to arrive at an *appropriate level* of anonymisation that will not lessen the use-value of the data.

1. General Approach:

- Remove major identifying data (real names, place and company names)
- Remove all identifying details (names, street-names, real names, occupational details)
- Replace with descriptions that reflect the significance of the original text within the context of the transcript
- Keep a tracking table to record all changes and to link real names with pseudonyms (see 3. below)

2. Flagging Anonymised Text

It is desirable to indicate where anonymisation has occurred, both to inform secondary researchers and to facilitate checking and proofing the process of anonymisation itself.

We recommend the following approach. At the start of the text to be anonymised, use the punctuation marks @@. At the end of the text, use the marks ##. These characters are unlikely to appear for any other reason in the text.

For example: "My mother's name was Mary Brown" becomes "My mother's name was @@Ann Smith##."

¹ Thanks to *Timescapes* at the University of Leeds and the *Life History and Social Change Project* at NUI Maynooth for allowing us to draw on their in-house guidelines in preparing this document.

3. Keeping Track of Anonymisation

All changes should be noted in a table similar to the example provided below. This aids review of the anonymisation process by yourself and/or other members of the research team, and helps ensure consistency across documents.

It is also a good idea to note any named person or place even if you decide *not* to anonymise them. Make sure you use the same spelling in the table as in the transcript.

Name in transcript	Anonymised name	Nature of individual or place (e.g.interviewee, husband of, place of work, etc.)	Special alerts or queries

4. What to Anonymise:

a) Names of people

Describe according to the person's significance within the context of the transcript: 'female/male friend,' 'father,' 'teacher,' etc.

It is usually desirable to use a pseudonym, especially if the person is referred to more than once in the transcript.

"I was talking to my neighbour, Mary, and I said" would become "I was talking to my neighbour, @@Sarah##, and I said".

Pseudonyms should be consistent within the document. In other words, if you change Mary to Ann, ensure that in every instance where Mary is mentioned, it is changed to Ann.

It may not always be necessary to disguise the names of high-profile individuals. For example: "I remember, De Valera was president at that time."

b) Names of places

The kinds of placenames that should be anonymised will depend on context and may include: countries, cities, towns, villages, rural areas, schools and universities, places of work. The key question to be considered is whether or not there is a significant or long term attachment that would link an individual clearly to that place?

Describe the anonymised place according to its significance within the context of the transcript:

“We had the reception at Ballymascanlan hotel”
“We had the reception at @@a local hotel##.”

Where possible and appropriate, include information about the broad regional area when anonymising placenames. For example, “I was brought up in Killarney” becomes “I was brought up in @@Kilkeely, in the South-West##.” IQDA recommends using the NUTS 3 regional divisions where possible and appropriate.

Nuts 3 Regional Divisions

1. Border: The counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, Sligo
2. West: The counties of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon
3. Midland: The counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath
4. Mid-East: The counties of Kildare, Meath and Wicklow
5. Dublin Region: the city of Dublin, and the counties of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South Dublin
6. South-East: The counties of Carlow, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford
7. South-West: The counties of Cork and Kerry
8. Mid-West: The counties of Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary
9. Northern Ireland

If there is mention of more than one place, the most desirable solution is to use a range of pseudonyms, keeping them consistent within a document. An alternative solution is to use numbered place identifiers. For example, “I was brought up in Killarney” becomes “I was brought up in @@South-Western Town 1##. However, this may make it more difficult to track placenames across the anonymised transcript, and make the transcript itself less easy to read.

In some circumstances it may be necessary to add additional information that indicates other significant aspects of the place in question. For example:

For example: “I went to The High School in Rathgar” becomes “I went to @@a private secondary school in Dublin##”

In some cases it may not be necessary to anonymise places. For example, you may decide that in the case of universities, it may be necessary only to anonymise the dates of attendance: Thus: “I went to Trinity in 1953” becomes “I went to Trinity in @@the early fifties##.” However, this decision must be taken in the context of other information provided within the transcript.

c) Names of organisations

It may be necessary to anonymise these depending on context. The key question to consider is whether or not the organisation is unique enough for individuals to be identified through their association with it.

If you do anonymise the name of an organisation, do so by referring to its broad category e.g. @@Church choir##, or @@local football club##, and include an alert in the Anonymisation Table. As with names and places, provide sufficient information in your description to reflect the significance of the organisation in the context of the whole transcript.

d) Names of occupations

In some instances occupational data alone will not identify people. For example, many women worked as nurses in Ireland.

Where an occupational title is likely to identify individuals, replace with a more general description. For example: "I was the third secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs" becomes "I was @@a senior civil servant## in the Department of Foreign Affairs"

Similarly, employers' names can be replaced by a more general category. Thus, "I worked as a waitress in Bewleys on Westmoreland Street" becomes "I worked as a waitress in @@a café in Dublin##."

e) Other potentially identifying information

In some contexts, information about nationality or ethnicity may easily reveal identity, e.g. "the Lithuanians who took over the shop." This can be changed simply to "the @@people## who took over the shop."

Other examples of information that may identify individuals under certain circumstances include names of countries, subjects studied at school or college, model of car driven, and so on. As a general rule, judgement must be exercised about whether or not any particular item in the transcript must be altered in order to preserve confidentiality and privacy.

5. Highly sensitive information

Under some circumstances it may be necessary to excise sections from transcripts, or to withhold individual transcripts from within a project, for example where sensitive text might expose participants to legal action, or "place them at risk of harm, scandal or ridicule" (Corti et al. 2000 [31]).

Other strategies for dealing with sensitive data may include:

- Closure of materials for a specified period, agreed with the depositor
- Restricted access, where certain materials are only available to particular kinds of researchers, and/or where requests for access are vetted by the depositor

Please consult the management team at IQDA if you have any concerns or queries about the suitability of particular data or sections of data for archiving.

6. Useful additional reading:

Corti, Louise, Annette Day and Gill Blackhouse. 2000. "Confidentiality and Informed Consent: Issues for Consideration in the Preservation of and Provision of Access to Qualitative Data Archives." FQS Forum: Qualitative Social Research/Sozialforschung 1, 3, Art. 7.

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1024/2208>