

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

What's a transcribe-a-thon?

By the People invites you to contribute to public knowledge by transcribing Library of Congress digital collections at crowd.loc.gov. This is a guide for how (and why) to run a *By the People* transcribing event.

A transcribe-a-thon can be...

- A time for people to 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
- Focused on a specific *By the People* campaign
- Focused on a specific task such as reviewing or tagging
- A scaffolded introduction to *By the People* and Library of Congress collections
- A way to connect your group, institution, place, or area of interest and the Library of Congress

Why host a transcribe-a-thon?

- Connect to history and primary source documents
- Build skills in reading and interpreting handwriting
- Build relationships in your community
- Gain confidence and insight by working and learning together
- Introduce new people to *By the People* and help them to contribute
- As a service event for your school or organization
- It's fun!

Resources

By the People resources for transcription events available on the [Resources](#) page include:

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

Before planning your event

1. **Try out *By the People*!** You'll only be able to plan and lead a successful event if you're familiar with the website, project goals, and the material you will be focused on. 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. Read through the [By the People instructions](#). Spend time getting accustomed to the structure and texts of your chosen campaign or subject.

2. **Define your goals for the event.** What do you hope to gain from the event? 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.
3. **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Use the *By the People* [Resources](#) listed above, including the handout of instructions and "Getting Started" presentation to orient your participants. Familiarize yourself with these tools and modify them for your needs.

Planning your event

Time

A transcription event could be an hour or an entire day. We recommend 1.5 - 3 hours, which allows time for introductory information, group activity, and independent work.

User accounts

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

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

Technology

It is most comfortable for most people to transcribe with a keyboard and mouse rather than on a mobile device. *By the People* is optimized for use on modern browsers.

In-Person Considerations

Space

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. If using Wi-Fi, make sure any passwords are 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.

Recruiting 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). Outreach strategies to try:

- Posting on social media
- Sending an email or e-newsletter, 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
- Let us know about your event! If you [contact the *By the People* team](#), we can share it in our communication channels. We'd also love to send you some *By the People* goodies to give away at your event!

During the event

Welcoming

Welcome attendees. If in person, help them find them a seat, and point out restrooms and exits. If virtual, point out important software features such as how to ask questions.

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

If the group is small enough, start with a round of introductions. In addition to names, ask people to identify their level of experience with transcription and *By the People*. Leverage experienced transcribers as mentors during the event.

Introducing

We recommend opening by:

- Presenting an overview of the goals of the event and *By the People*. You can use or modify 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 get to How-To and Quick Tips.
- Walking through the printable quick instructions PDF.

More helpful content and context:

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

Practicing

After the introduction, we recommend a group exercise to help volunteers get comfortable with the process and with working together. Review is a nice entry point as you can work on a transcription done by another volunteer. It also helps emphasize the safety net of transcribing in a peer-reviewed system. Everyone is welcome to try their best, make mistakes and learn from them.

Try reviewing a short page together as a group. What was done correctly? What edits are needed? What gray areas can you talk through together?

Settling in

Have the participants split into pairs or small groups to do a few more reviews or transcriptions together before working on their own. If many of the participants are already practiced transcribers, you may want to invite them to partner with less experienced participants.

Choose your own adventure! Make sure participants know they can choose what seems easy or interesting to them. Volunteers should follow their interests and use the “Find a new page” button as desired. Don’t be afraid to start a page even if you can’t finish it. Just make sure to hit “Save” before moving on.

After some small group activity, you can also split participants 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 workstations are mobile, have the groups physically move to sit together. These sub-communities can then support each other and share tips and interesting findings as they delve into similar tasks.

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, that will learn and grow together – even if only for today!

If your transcribe-a-thon is also happening in distributed locations through online participation, still try to have a real-time discussion where people can ask questions and chat. Please note that the *By the*

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

Share on social media and please tag @Crowd_LOC if on Twitter! Don't forget to take some photos (with permission of course)! Share event photos in posts and back to the Library of Congress.

Screen breaks

Encourage everyone to rest their eyes at least once an hour. Schedule mini breaks, and suggest participants stretch their legs, and step away from the computer.

Wrapping up

Take some time to share and celebrate what you accomplished. Ask participants to share any favorite pages, stories, or facts they encountered. Compare the current numbers of not started and completed items in the campaigns you worked on to those when you started (Remembering of course that other volunteers may also have been transcribing during your event).

Thank attendees and organizers!

Announce any plans for future transcription events and make sure new volunteers know they can keep contributing to *By the People* after the event.

Give out *By the People* swag. Contact us before your event and we'll send you fun stuff for participants.

After the event

[Contact By the People](#) to let us know about your event! With your permission, we may share your photos and recognize your work. We're also eager to get your feedback on this guide – what worked or didn't? What other activities or introductions did you try that others might want to know about?

We're always eager to hear feedback about what did and didn't work for your group. We'd also love to share your success: if you can please include what you worked on, what you accomplished, and photos (with permission) that we can share with our volunteer network!

These recommendations are modeled on Wikipedia edit-a-thons and their excellent "[How to host an edit-a-thon](#)" documentation. Our gratitude to all Wikipedians who contributed to them.

Thanks to DC Public Library for testing this guide with a Mary Church Terrell transcribe-a-thon, January 21, 2019.