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Express Scribe

Transcribing audio is the process of taking a recording of speech and turning it into written text. The deaf, blind, people with cognitive disabilities, language learners, groups with a tradition of oral histories, people with limited Internet connectivity, and people with limited access to audio equipment are all potentially served by audio transcription. Express Scribe is an audio transcription program by NCH Software. Users can play an audio clip using Express Scribe, which can then be used to control dictation playback via a foot pedal or hot-keys (keyboard shortcuts). The hot-key/foot pedal command assignments are fully customizable by the user. The possible commands include stopping the audio clip, rewinding, fast-forwarding, playing at a slow/fast speed, playing at the real speed, opening the program, controlling the volume, changing the playback speed, etc. The program has a window where users can enter the actual transcription. Alternatively, users can run Express Scribe and transcribe in their choice word processor because the hot-key command assignments are enabled system-wide while the program is open.

NCH Software offers a free and professional version of Express Scribe. The free version is compatible only with AltoEdge brand foot pedals, but it supports encrypted dictation and sound clips in most common audio formats. AltoEdge foot pedals range in price from $69.95-$329.00, but they are not required for transcription given the hot-key feature. The professional version of Express Scribe costs $40 and offers additional features, like support for video files, technical support, and is not limited to AltoEdge foot pedals—and there are occasional promotions that further reduce the cost. NCH Software also recommends for Express Scribe to be used in conjunction with Express Dictate, a dictation-recording program that they offer a free 14-day trial for. Single academic users who will be using it at an educational institution and who do not need security-encryption would need to pay $99 for Express Dictate. A single professional user who does not need encryption, but wants the full set of features would purchase the $129 version. Users, like the ones working on medical or legal transcriptions, who need security-encryption should get the $139 version.

Express Scribe is available on both Windows and Mac systems, although the Windows version is compatible with more audio file types than the Mac. As a potentially free transcription software, notable features include variable speed playback, where users can customize how quickly or slowly they need to hear a recording without the pitch being affected (i.e. slowed-down audio that is indicated by a drop in pitch). Another neat feature is sound optimization—users can reduce background noise, boost the volume by 10%, and choose only to keep audio frequencies above 450Hz. The program allows users to forward dictation directly from the program interface using e-mail, the computer network, or by File Transfer Protocol. Audio files can be loaded directly from a CD or docked from a portable recording device. Overall, it appears that many considerations were taken into account towards making the software a useful tool to streamline and expedite the process for transcribers.

Support for video files through the professional edition may prove useful because one of the many uses of creating transcriptions is for captioning videos. Captions are important for users who need audio information within the context of visual cues. Further, in this digital age, audio transcriptions can be indexed, copied, read by machines, etc. In turn, this provides the benefit of enabling people to search the transcribed text, as well as the ability to print it—enabling the information to be mobile for those without access to CD/MP3 players. Especially when it comes to information provided via multimedia, it is in the best interest of the audio recording provider to increase their traffic through inclusivity of the information receivers. Also, people who participate in audio transcriptions could potentially benefit because transcribing is recognized as an occupation. Audio transcription is not only beneficial to the information receivers and the information providers, it makes it so the recording complies with the W3C’s Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

The deaf and/or hard of hearing are the most obvious beneficiaries from audio transcriptions. Still, audio transcription would also enable intellectual access and facilitate comprehension for people with cognitive disabilities who prefer reading to processing information aurally, or the blind and/or hard of seeing who prefer to use refreshable Braille or screen readers, even if they can hear. Jaeger (2012) writes that intellectual access is “the ability to understand the information,” and that it “can be understood as the accessing of the information itself after physical access has been obtained” (p. 27-8). Transcriptions can also help groups without physical or learning disabilities, like language learners—those who are more proficient readers than listeners, or those who do not understand the language and need translations of the audio. “Physical access to information is generally viewed as access to the document or other form embodying information…literally the process of getting to the information that is being sought” (Jaeger, 2012, p. 27). Considering this, audio transcriptions also enables physical access for the people who do not have enough bandwidth to download audio/video clips, as well as people who are unable to listen to audio over the Internet—like those without speakers, or even people without headphones at a quiet library.

Aside from enabling accessibility, institutions, like universities, who stream podcasts—which are growing in popularity—can adopt Express Scribe in creating audio transcripts of the podcasts. Some students may want the ability to utilize quotations from their lectures. Teachers of ELL students or groups with a vested interest in immigrants could work on providing transcripts of audio resources. Further, radio stations (Internet and AM/FM) and churches may also use Express Scribe to provide access to the shows or the sermons. Audio transcriptions are already fairly common in legal, medical, business, and press settings—interviews, meetings, speeches, training sessions, seminars, court proceedings, and physician notes are transcribed in order to keep records and facilitate access to those records. Audio transcriptions, being a gateway for video captions and translations, make Express Scribe appropriate for those who are actively involved in YouTube or global information providers. Being a part of the digital age, people now curate and create multimedia and greater accessibility would only prove beneficial to those who are putting their effort in to managing and creating these information sources.

Works Cited

Jaeger, P.T. (2012). *Disability and the Internet: Confronting a Digital Divide*. Boulder, CO:

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