

COORDINATING A TRANSCOMMUNICATION SESSION

Although the purpose of any “ghost hunting” vigil is varied, its primary objective is to transcommunicate: to make “contact” with putative spirits and carry on an exchange. Audio-visual recording is the preferred technique because it, both, documents a session and yields the most intriguing findings in the recorded audio: electronic voice phenomena.

For many, such vigils are a free-form interrogation of awkward, rambling questions as if they’re calling a late-night chat line for the first time. If you were a spirit on the “other side” of that interview, you’d be reminded of those socially awkward party-goers who corner you with their doleful smalltalk until you have to make your getaway and lie about needing a restroom.

If you want to increase your chances of making meaningful contact, your vigil activities should, above all else, show a little forethought and empathy.

Firstly, establish beforehand with your colleagues just how much you would like to achieve by conducting a vigil. What sorts of findings do you hope to acquire? What kind of communication are you looking to establish? How much do you know (or feel you know) about the background of your case, and which background details do you want to emphasize during the vigil? Are there buzzwords, target objects, hot-button issues, or specific behaviors that you intend to use to “bait” activity? Which of your colleagues will be in charge of these? Etc.

Secondly, try not to get stuck in a single assumption about who or what you’re interviewing. For instance, if you presume that a child is the source of paranormal activity, but your findings point to an adult male, you will have wasted your time using childish appeals and using childhood activities as your frame of reference (not to mention an insulting amount of “baby talk”). Leave some options to switch gears and test the range of possibilities.

Thirdly, establish the communication protocols with the “unseen spirit.” Talk frankly and clearly about where the equipment in the room is, and how it might be identified. A nineteenth century spirit is not necessarily going to know what a K-II meter is, nor understand the concept of a device “recording” a voice. Try to explain the process in a way already familiar to them—digital audio is like a printing press to reproduce sound instead of printed word; a video camera is like a moving picture book that captures sketches of what’s in the room, or a flip-book of daguerreotypes; an audio recorder is like a transcription machine, or even a little Victrola.) And so on. Encourage experimentation with the equipment to figure out how to influence it, but offer reassurances that the equipment can’t be harmed, nor will they be harmed by it. For instance, “You’ll see colored lights around the room. You can go to these. They won’t hurt you, and they’re not like flames.”

It’s also critically important to explain in advance that you won’t necessarily be able to hear or see their responses, and

that they shouldn’t assume you don’t care just because you don’t seem to understand them at first; reassure them that the recording might let you hear, and perhaps see, what you can’t right now.

Don’t focus too much on just the equipment, either. After all, you’re investigating this location because others have reported activity, and “activity” is another way of saying that an entity has made its presence known. Make use of what entities already know how to do, as well as encourage them to experiment with what they don’t. Ask them to use old-school knocks and taps, to touch people in the room, to change the temperature, etc. And don’t let yourself get discouraged when these don’t materialize.

One last basic caution to recommend is, don’t make too many assumptions about what your putative ghost knows about its own circumstances. Avoid asking, “Do you know you are dead?” because 1) maybe they don’t know, and 2) maybe you don’t know. Even if you strongly suspect that you are dealing with a posthumous soul, calling attention to that—maybe for the first time—comes on a little strong. Be sensitive to the needs of what you can’t see. Furthermore, whatever you might be communicating with, you don’t know enough about it to assume it’s a ghost, or an elemental spirit, or a voice from a different space-time dimension, or whatever.

Now that basics have been covered, let’s review some of the finer points of using equipment and interrogation techniques during a vigil.

Synchronizing and Documenting:

Whether or not you bring along an audio recording device to do the job, noting the start time of your vigil, the specific location, and the names of all parties present is an indispensable practice. Later, in the post-investigation stage of audio analysis, it will help you to cross-reference your eyewitness experiences and media findings, as well as assist in the report process. Furthermore, faithfully announce any outside or inside noise, or any activity that might create a sound that could later be interpreted as anomalous. The most frequent offenders in this are whisperers. Don’t whisper during a vigil; use your normal tone of voice. That way no one will mistake something you said under your breath as an EVP.

Baselines:

Although general baseline sweeps are conducted before the investigation goes “lights out,” it’s still good practice to enter into a vigil session reestablishing what the norm is for temperature, EMFs, light quality, and, most importantly, sounds. This last factor is too often overlooked, and in the audio analysis random noises that could have been accounted for in an on-the-spot baseline sound reading become false EVP hits, time-consuming as well as disappointing to discount.

Equipment Placement:

Obviously, it’s necessary to place equipment like K-II meters in a central location where it can be monitored, and it’s handy

to have tools like EMF readers, still shot cameras, video cams, thermocouple devices and anemometers at the ready. However, audio recorders are not always best placed nearby or even centrally. If three or more investigators bring digital audio recorders, this is an opportunity to triangulate the location of an EVP in the room by comparing clarity and volume of the same EVP. Furthermore, such comparisons will provide a system whereby anomalous sounds can be crosschecked. (For example, what sounds like a voice across the room in one recording might well be the zipper of an investigator's jacket on another recording.) Likewise, a video record of a vigil sometimes reveals that the investigators' own activities are responsible for an anomalous sound in the audio evidence. When one piece of equipment can be located to enhance the effectiveness of another, everyone wins: placing a digital audio recorder beside a K-II meter, for example, allows for the possibility of EMF communication as well as articulated speech, and training a video camera on the both of them at worst documents the activity as it's happening and at best captures unseen anomalies that coincide with the activity visible on the K-II. Whatever your strategy, good documentation is half the battle of an effective investigation. If you can place your equipment to assist this process—all the better! However, be sure to announce where you're placing your audio equipment, and include those details in the log you submit for the report.

Introductions and Explanations

Let's say you wake up tomorrow morning to find that there are workers in hazmat suits and you can't get a straight answer from any one of them as to who they are, why they're in your home, and what the hazard might be. You'd either be panicked or you'd order everyone to get out. Either way, the lack of communication would adversely affect your mood. Similarly, introductions and explanations of your intentions are polite, productive and reassuring to any unseen entity that might otherwise be experiencing such frustration at strangers in its midst. It's good for at least one team member to state who the group is, who invited it, and why it has come. However, individual introductions are also encouraged, followed by an invitation to disclose the name of any unseen presence in the room. Creating a rapport with alleged spirits starts with a show of the rapport you already have with one another as colleagues and friends.

Names:

First and last names are good, since if they show up as Class A or B EVPs, they make background checks possible. Remember, though, that depending on the era and class to which a "spirit" might belong, you might wish to use phrases like "surname"; "Christian name"; "maiden name"; "family name"; "ancestral name"; and so on. You might also wish to ask if the spirits have titles like "Mrs." or "Dr.," "Jr." and so on.

Be Creative:

Try to get into the "mind" of the spirit by imagining they are still alive in their own time and place, and try to get into the psychology of the spirit by considering what concerns, fears, desires, and so on, it might have.

Yes/No:

You won't always want your questions to evoke only yes/no responses. While it's believed that short answers are the norm in EVP evidence because they take the least amount of energy to communicate, "Yes" and "No" are also the most commonly misinterpreted EVPs for that same reason. (For instance, any breathy hiss can be taken to be saying "yes.") Starting out this way might help to accustom the "spirit" to the technique, but eventually you'll want to phrase your questions so that they're not putting words in the spirit's mouth. (E.g., Q. "Are you angry?" A. "No." or "I'm not angry.") Questions that begin with *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *how* and *when* are a simple way to accomplish that. Some examples:

What year were you born?
How old are you?
Where were you raised?
Who is the President of the United States?
What are your parents' names?
What sort of work did you do?
What's your favorite _____ ?
What sort of clothing is fashionable right now?
Can you describe yourself?

Speech:

If, through your background research, you're certain that a specific era is relevant to the investigation, you may wish to express some of your questions in the proper diction of that era, while avoiding slang phrases that are time-bound to your own era and culture. Even words familiar to us in an everyday sense, like "kids" and "awesome", might be taken for their literal meanings. Find a neutral way to phrase your questions and speak as clearly, but naturally, as you can.

Be Casual:

Sometimes it's good just to take a break from the Q & A and have a casual, comfortable conversation with your colleagues. In a good many cases, investigators have discovered in the evidence that spirits offer their unsolicited reactions to offhanded remarks. Let them feel like they're just "hanging out" and participating, rather than feel like they're in front of a tribunal.

A Note About Provocation:

Popular TV shows depicting "extreme ghost hunting"—a nonsensical attribution from the get-go—sometimes showcase an aggressive style of vigil, called "provocation." It usually involves harsh and insensitive language over otherwise sensitive issues, which is intended to run afoul of the ghost. Though there may be some locations that warrant such a technique—locations with a history of violence and aggression, or hostile entities known to threaten others or manifest in the company of aggression—usually provocation is a disrespectful and unwise method that potentially subjects the occupants to further unwanted activity. In short, it has the considerable potential to do more harm than good, and, used purely for the "thrill of danger," also does a great disservice to the field of paranormal investigating. If this is your first EVP vigil, bullying your host makes for a terrible beginning to your tenure and reputation as a paranormal investigator.