

Computer Assisted Handwritten Document Transcription Through
Subword Spotting

by
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ABSTRACT

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1 Introduction

At the current rate of FamilySearch’s volunteer indexing program, FamilySearch collects documents faster than they can transcribe them. While OCR technology has become accurate enough for tasks in printed document transcription, handwriting recognition has not reached the same level of performance. Accurately transcribing historical documents require a burdensome number of man-hours. This is a problem which faces genealogical record providers, archivists of general historical documents, and applies to a number of tasks related to offline handwriting transcription.

A fully automated, unconstrained handwriting recognition system with an acceptable level of accuracy on historical documents is not possible with the current level of technology. During a recent competition for handwriting recognition on historical documents, the top method had a word error rate above 25%[16]. Historical documents have noise, degradation, and other issues which cause accuracies to be lower than other documents. This has left most handwriting transcription work to humans. However, there are still ways to leverage recognition techniques to speed up the transcription process, while allowing human oversight and guidance to maintain accuracy. These we will refer to as computer assisted transcription (CAT) methods.

The transcription of handwritten historical documents is a service needed by organizations such as genealogical resource providers (FamilySearch, Ancestry, MyHeritage, etc.) and digital archives (the Internet Archive, libraries, etc.). Additionally, the general problem of offline handwriting transcription is highly demanded, evidenced by the numerous businesses offering this service. Those using these services expect human level transcription, but using a CAT method can cut the number of man-hours needed without losing the human oversight.

We have viewed this particularly from the perspective of FamilySearch’s volunteer indexing program. Having a better method of transcribing, which is more effective and pleasant to use, would draw more volunteers to the program while increasing the productivity of the volunteers. Our transcription paradigm reduces transcription to simple short tasks that could easily be completed by a casual user. It additionally makes it easier to bypass difficult parts of a document, allowing someone else to decipher it. Our paradigm also lends itself to a mobile environment, as it is very adaptable to a small screen and doesn’t require typing.

We propose a recognition technique which relies on the key idea that if we can recognize only parts of text, the missing information can be implied by use of a dictionary and language model. This can be compared to the well known game “Wheel of Fortune” where players are given a handful of letters, their placement in a phrase/word and a category to aid their guessing. See Fig. 1 for an example. In our method, a partial recognition (the known letters of the “game”) would be achieved by spotting frequently occurring character n-grams in handwritten documents (where n is 2 or 3). Character n-grams are useful as they occur with greater frequency than words, and are more distinguishable than individual letters. With this technique, a parallel CAT system could be constructed which allows a computer and multiple humans to work in concert to transcribe a corpus. This system particularly relies on very minimalistic human input (typically selecting things). Additionally, character n-gram spotting can also be used in letter exemplar finding (to aid a human transcriber) or to produce an index for an exemplar free word spotting method.

2 Related Work

Segmentation is a difficult part of handwriting recognition. While line segmentation techniques are able to accurately extract lines of text and with good success extract words, letter segmentation is an open problem (in the 2009 ICDAR handwriting segmentation contest, multiple entries achieved 99% line segmentation, the best word segmentation method achieved only 95% word segmentation

A n t h o _ _
_ _ c h a e _

Figure 1: These are two words with a handful of letters left out. It is not hard to guess the correct words, especially if told these are names. A computer, with access to a dictionary, can be far more effective at this guessing game than a human.

accuracy[?]). Whole word recognition is infeasible for large vocabularies, so we would prefer to recognize individual characters. But to properly segment the letters from a handwritten word (particularly if it is written in a cursive script) is infeasible without having the transcription first. This is Sayre’s paradox, where the segmentation and recognition are dependent on one another.[22] To solve this, the state-of-the-art approaches have tried to recognize and segment simultaneously.

Hidden Markov models (HMM) were borrowed from speech recognition to achieve this task, and worked reasonably well[11]. However, HMMs have their own limitations, particularly the Markov assumption and the fact that they are most effective with windows less than the length of a letter, meaning context is often lost.

Recurrent neural networks (RNN) do not share the same limitations as HMMs, and have passed HMMs in performance[7]. However, they are still lacking the accuracy that is needed for a reliable automatic transcription system; the state-of-the-art results for RNNs (employing long short-term memory blocks) still may have above a 25% word error rate when transcribing a historical corpus[16].

Due to the limitations of current handwriting recognition methods, we believe that a fully automated handwriting transcription is out of reach. We thus turn our attention to semi-automated recognition approaches, where we are still using a human to transcribe, but also some intelligent recognition technology. A semi-automated solution will outperform a fully automated system in terms of accuracy and is still far more effective than completely manual transcription. Standard CAT approaches use human feedback to correct automatic transcription in an intelligent way, such that it learns something from the corrections. An active learning approach to handwriting transcription is similar to CAT, but is not concerned about achieving human level accuracy, just better accuracy, and thus requires less human involvement [17]. Since we wish to have a system with human comparable accuracy, thus we will focus on CAT approaches.

Toselli, et al[19] have explored the realm of CAT using the idea of user-verified prefixes. They use a fairly standard HMM recognition model as the backbone of their approach, and take advantage of the incremental nature of the Viterbi decoding algorithm. The recognition is done for a line of text and the user corrects the first error. The Viterbi is then run again, but this time using the assumption that everything occurring before the correction is correct, and thus reusing the computation up to that point. They have also explored slight variations of the same approach that enable more fluent user input with a touchpad[21], mouse[14], or multimodal[20] which speed up the transcription process by allowing more intuitive use interaction (see Fig. 2). Their approach relies on a language model to make corrections on a line when a supervision is made. This means it cannot effectively transcribe documents containing non-sentence writing, such as tables and lists, with this method. Serrano, et al also have pursued a similar approach, where the user corrects the n words in which the recognition model had the least confidence[18].

While it is useful to use an automatic handwriting recognition method as part of a CAT approach to reduce the human burden, we cannot use the same type of recognition used in most

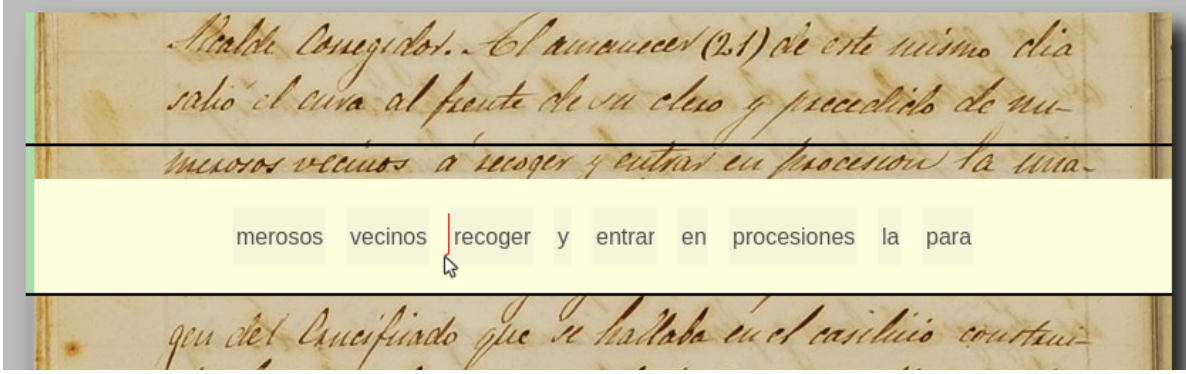
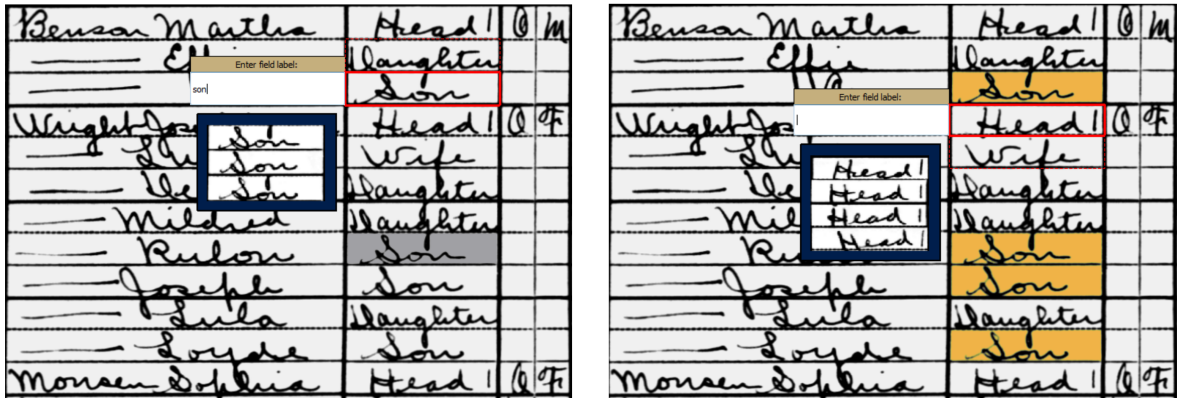


Figure 2: A screenshot of a demo of Toselli et al's multimodal CAT system. The red line is drawn by the user to indicate the need to insert a word into the automatically obtained transcription.

CAT systems, where there is a reliance on the predictive capacity of a language model. Some documents are not sentences, and thus cannot be transcribed by these methods. However, many documents are structured such that a pattern can be learned to assist in transcription.

Robert Clawson[5]¹ designed a CAT system for tabular documents, which have a clear pattern. His approach relied on simply finding matches in the document column and assigning them the same user specified label, as seen in Fig. 3. This provides an accurate CAT system where the user oversees all transcription. The user oversight of matches was accomplished by showing a list of matches to the user (with an adjustable threshold for sensitivity) from which the user removed the false-positive matches. This leveraged the human user's natural ability to discriminate. However, the approach as a whole is limited in that it requires frequent word repetition to be effective. While some tabular documents have this, it is not true for most documents. Additionally, this method had a computation burden where an offline comparison of word similarities was done.



(a) A small window shows the user matching words later in the column. The user can get rid of bad matches.

(b) The matched words are given the same label when entered.

Figure 3: Clawson's CAT system for tabular documents.

We will show that an alternative to word matching, or word spotting, is character n-gram spotting, as n-grams have more frequent repetition than words do. This will provide the backbone

¹You can view a short demo and explanation of his approach at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqdvZEPnBEw>

of our CAT system.

Word spotting was first proposed as an alternative to transcribing a corpus. Rather than digitizing the document text image so standard text searches can be run, the document is searched using the images themselves, either with a keyword string or a keyword image (exemplar image). There are two primary approaches to featurize the images when word spotting: holistic features which capture information about a whole image (word) and local or sequential features[13]. Holistic features have one description for an entire word image (such as a bag-of-visual-words), where as local features have descriptor for a small portion, or window, of a word image. As local features provide much more detail and are more flexible than holistic features, they have been the most actively pursued in research.

Most of these locally directed feature approaches share the common theme of taking features from vertical slice windows (usually only one or a handful of pixels wide). They compare an exemplar using either dynamic time warping (DTW) or HMMs, relying on a prior line segmentation. The variance between the methods largely lies in the features used. Some use small square windows to allow totally segmentation-free word spotting using a sliding window[15].

Rodriguez et al[13] proposed a simple histogram gradient feature which they compared against the popular profile and transition based features of Rath and Manmantha[12], gradient and transition focused features of Marti and Bunke[11] and simple histogram features of Bunke et al[4], showing their improved performance. They also showed that a HMM worked better than DTW, for their features. However, their method was not an exemplar based approach.

Recently, Aldavert et al[1] and Almazan et al[3] have presented superior word spotting methods which rely on heuristic descriptions. Aldavert et al use the well known bag-of-visual-words method, including recent improvements from the Computer Vision community. This is a very simple, yet effective, exemplar spotting approach. Aldavert et al use Fischer vectors, which are similar to bag-of-visual-words, with spatial pyramids in addition to a special pyramids of character histograms to find a new space in training to which both strings and word images can be embedded in. This allows it to perform both string and exemplar queries as well as hybrid queries which yield excellent results.

We are interested in spotting character n-grams (bi- and trigrams) rather than words. While this hasn't explicitly been done, we feel examining the performance of other methods on short words (2 to 3 letters) is instructive. Rothacker et al[15] report $\sim 46\%$ and $\sim 55\%$ mean Average Precision (mAP), a drop by $\sim 5\%$ and $\sim 14\%$, for two and three lettered words respectively with their segmentation free HMM based method. Fischer et al[6] report $\sim 70\%$ and $\sim 83\%$ mAP for two and three lettered words for their line segmentation dependent, character HMM based method. While neither of these numbers are very promising, Almazan et al[2] observe that sliding window approaches can frequently find false positives of short words inside other words (e.g. finding the word "the" inside the word "weather"). As this is precisely what we want to happen in n-gram spotting (we want to find groups of letters in the middle of words), we expect we should have more success spotting character n-grams than other methods in spotting short words. However, part of the poor accuracy in spotting short words is the fact that there is less information with which to discriminate; this is an obstacle we still must overcome.

3 Thesis Statement

Leveraging straight forward task of character n-gram spotting, we will construct a computer assisted transcription system, focusing on historical documents with limited vocabulary. Our system will use human interaction that is limited to small tasks, which are far easier to complete than typing. Alternate:

We will construct a computer assisted transcription system which will use character n-gram spotting to create an incomplete transcription of a document. Small tasks completed by users will guide the system to complete the transcription with high accuracy.

4 Project Description

We will develop a character n-gram spotter, experimenting with modifying existing methods as well as trying ones based on object detection strategies from computer vision. This performance will be empirically measured. Using the results of the performance of the n-gram spotting, we will evaluate how large of a dictionary our approach is feasible for.

We then will implement a demonstrative CAT tool using the flexibility of n-gram spotting. This will largely be a proof-of-concept work to show how one might use character n-gram spotting. We anticipate its performance to good, but it may be difficult to compare to similar tools as ours will be strongest in an application that slightly different to how most others have been tested.

4.1 Spotting

We require a spotting method that which can learn incrementally. Image exemplar spotting approaches are an easy way of doing this as new examples can simply become new queries. However, other trained methods may be able to be updated. There are some spotting methods which are able to do both image and string based queries[3] which would be useful for leveraging both offline training and new exemplars.

Given our specific need in spotting character n-grams, we will likely have to adapt the current word spotting technology to get the performance we need. This will be a preliminary task that will provide the backbone for our CAT system.

4.2 Preprocessing

All documents will be have some noise reduction done. They will be deskewed, line segmented, have their text lines deslanted and have the words segmented. Word segmentation will likely have errors, but these can be corrected by users.

4.3 Dictionary

Dictionary look-ups with wildcards is a well studied problem. An approach which would be well suited to our needs is n-gram indexing, in which each n-gram has all words which contain it indexed to it. Then a search is simply an intersection of all the indexes for the n-grams in the query.

4.4 Tool

The system is designed to leverage to flexible nature of using character n-gram spotting to perform word completion. It is designed to be interactive with multiple asynchronous users, using user feedback to improve its spotting. It is modularized into a handful of program and user tasks.

It will begin with a set of n-gram exemplars, or trained n-gram representations obtained offline. Using these we will try to generalize the various forms of handwriting into a handful of examples for each n-gram. These will be used to begin spotting the documents. Depending on the character n-gram spotter's performance, a training step may need to precede the main execution, allowing us to gather context/author specific n-gram exemplars.

The system is broken into tasks, some which are completed by the user, some which are completed by a server doing the computation/spotting. By including a task manager which distributes tasks, we can allow for multiple users to be working on the same set of documents simultaneously. See Fig. 4 for a brief outline. The tasks to be done by the computation server and the user will be the following subsections.

This method is unique in that the different user's progress will help produce more tasks, making the effort becomes very cooperative. This happens as each completed n-gram verification task will lend labels over a portion of the corpus being transcribed. This allows more possible transcriptions to be found. Each transcription that is done gives more n-gram image examples to the system to improve spotting, creating more tasks for the server and then other users. This incremental learning from new n-gram example images can be done in two ways: using them as a new image exemplars for queries directly or attempt to learn features from them to improve following queries. Additionally, we can use them as a refining tool to prune images returned by previous spotting tasks (that haven't been user-reviewed yet).

This prototype system will be developed as a in-browser app, thus making it immediately cross-compatible with all devices with a modern browser. A Node.js server will be created to communicate with the clients and the C++ program which will be responsible for performing the actual word spotting.

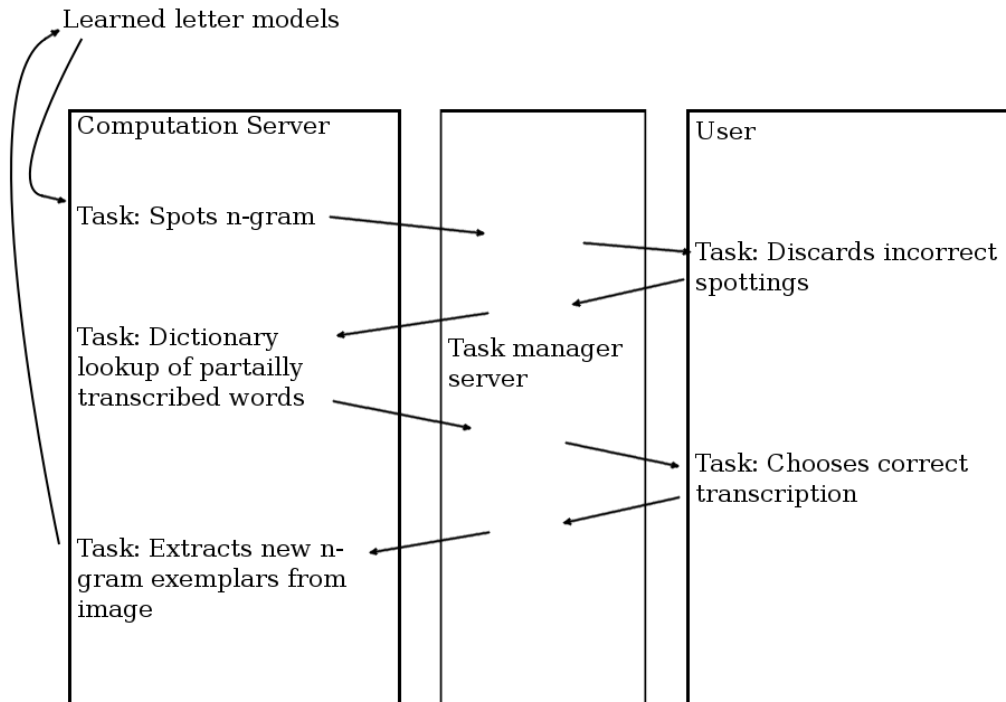


Figure 4: The work-flow of the proposed CAT system. This can support multiple computation servers and multiple users at the same time.

4.4.1 Computation Server Tasks

Character n-gram spotting

Select the most promising n-gram exemplar to spot. Spot that n-gram in the documents. Pass results to user for n-gram verification task.

Dictionary look-up

When a word has roughly 50% of its area labelled by n-grams, we create a regular expression representing what we know. This is based on the position of the n-grams in the word, using flexible wildcards to specify possible unrecognized characters and their position (the “Wheel of Fortune” game). If only a few words are returned by the regular expression (10 or less) we pass this to the user for the transcription selection task.

Incremental learning from transcription

After the user has confirmed a transcription for a word image, we can then extract new character n-gram exemplars from the image, using the spatial information we have from the n-grams spotted in the image. These can be author specific exemplars which can greatly improve spotting for pages with the same author. How the exemplar is used will depend on the final spotting algorithm selected; it may either be used directly as a query or as means to learn new character models.

4.4.2 User Tasks

Character n-gram verification (Fig. 5)

The user is shown the n-gram that was spotted and highlighted segments of the images which had positive results. The user discards any false-positives. The assumption is that most should be correct, thus making it easy to pick out those not belonging to the set.

Select correct transcription (Fig. 6)

The user is shown the image being transcribed and presented the list of possible transcriptions. The user either selects the correct transcription, or corrects the search by doing one or more of the following:

- Splitting the image into two words.
- Indicating the image is splicing a word (and which side).
- Indicating if either or both of the n-gram labels are wrong.
- Manually entering the transcription.

If a transcription is selected or entered, a letter alignment is guessed for the word (using the known n-grams as key anchors). The alignment is used to extract author specific n-gram exemplars which are returned to the program.

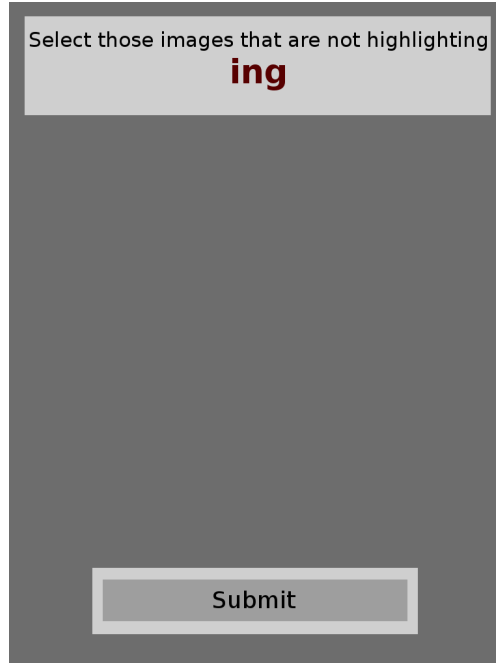


Figure 5: A mock-up of what the user might see when verifying character n-gram spotting. The highlighted images are from the server spotting a particular n-gram.

5 Validation

The n-gram spotting methods will be empirically tested using well known datasets (George Washington[9] and IAM[10]) as well as a dataset closer to the domain of our expected application of the transcription method.

5.1 User Study

Our CAT system must be validated with a user study as it’s goal is to be a more effective crowd-sourcing method for transcription. It is not purely intended to be faster (indeed, it may not be faster than other computer assisted transcription methods), but more modular, allowing for work to be broken up into smaller pieces, and more enjoyable to use. It clearly achieves modularity in design, but we want to see how fast it is and get user feedback to see if it is something people would enjoy using.

Most other computer assisted transcription methods rely on a more fully automated transcription upfront and report performance measures in terms of word error rate or effort reduction, which are measures of how many words the user had to correct. While our users will primarily be doing corrections as well, they will very different types of corrections (taps and swipes instead of typing). Thus it would be difficult to compare these other methods to our proposed method using the previously authors’ metrics, though they still may prove to be useful.

We propose doing a user study which would involve having a volunteer² use the system for about 5-10 minutes on their own device at their own convenience. This is probably the easiest way to get a large number of participants and a varying degree of experience transcribing documents

²Recruiting volunteers can be aided by using Robert Clawson’s volunteer testers list as a starting place. The rest will be gathered via on-campus flyers and personal connections.

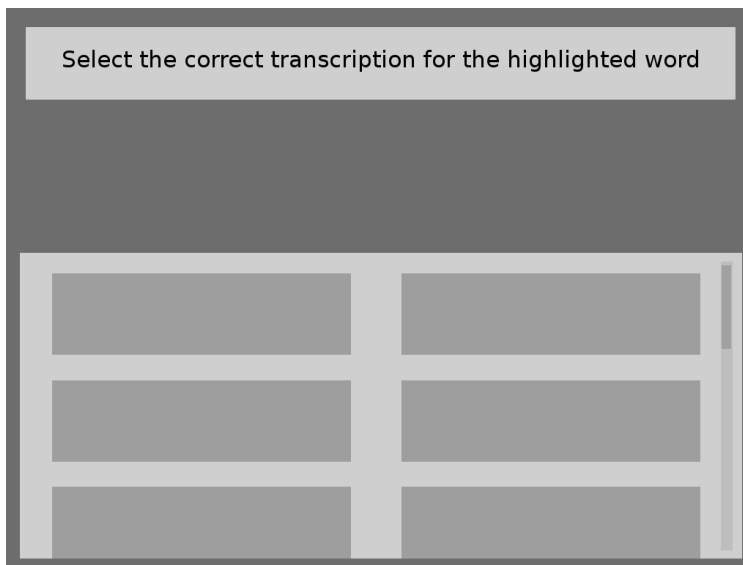


Figure 6: A mock-up of what the user might see when selecting a correct transcription. The transcription possibilities are returned from the server’s dictionary look-up.

among the volunteers. To encourage use on more platforms, so we get a broader survey, the study will encourage users to use tablets and phones. We will track what device they use, how many tasks they complete, how long it takes them to complete tasks, and errors they make, in addition to having the volunteers complete a short survey about their experience.

Given the flexibility of the system, we would like to test it on two different document types: a regular written text like the George Washington[9] or the Jennie Leavitt Smith[8] dataset, and a structured dataset such as census or marriage records. This will provide us with some comparison to Toselli’s CAT approaches (which work on corpora similar to the George Washington dataset) and Clawson’s CAT (which works on tabular documents).

It will be difficult to get a synchronized group of testers to explore the parallel nature of our method. Instead, we will complete a number of spotting verification tasks, and possibly transcription selection tasks, prior to having the users begin. These can then be fed to the system during a user test to simulate having other users on the system, although it may suffice to simply feed them the the system prior to the user interacting.

6 Thesis Schedule

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|--|-----------------|
| Finalization of spotting method | 1 February 2016 |
| Complete implementation of UI/backend | 1 April 2016 |
| Complete user tests | 15 April 2016 |
| Complete revisions | 1 May 2016 |
| Complete additional user tests | 15 May 2016 |
| Thesis written (all but final revisions) | 7 June 2016 |
| Thesis defended | 1 July 2016 |

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis proposal submitted by

Brian L. Davis

This thesis proposal has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

William A. Barrett, Chair

Date

Thomas W. Sederberg

Date

Daniel Zappala

Date

Quinn Snell
Graduate Coordinator