

# What the Heck Does That Say? Overcoming Difficult Handwriting

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Whether you struggle to decipher scribbled notations on 20<sup>th</sup> century documents or to understand the unique characteristics of 16th century penmanship, handwritten records can present quite a challenge. Although there is a learning curve when it comes to mastering these documents, with a strategic approach and some perseverance, you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish.

## Strategies for reading old handwriting

1. Whether using a paper document or a digital image, save the original record and never alter it. Instead, make copies on which you can freely make notes.
2. Skim the document to get a sense of the contents and understand the context of what you are reading. Try not to get hung up deciphering difficult-to-read words at this point, just get a quick overview.
3. Look for similar but more legible records on the same microfilm or in the same file which may help you read the document you are struggling with. Much of the "boilerplate" language in these records will be consistent, and the rest is usually the genealogically-significant information.
4. Determine the "hand" or style of writing, and use an alphabet guide to identify each letter. The tutorials at the end of this handout can help. Better yet, create your own alphabet guide using the document itself, becoming familiar with the style used by that particular writer. Start with words that are easy to read, cutting out or copying one alphabet letter at a time. (You may find that the writer uses several forms of the same alphabet letter.) This can ultimately save you time and help you interpret the writing more accurately. If the writer has created multiple documents in the same file or film, or if the record contains multiple pages, check as many as needed in order to have a good sense of how this writer forms his letters.
5. Start with the best possible image. If you want to see a bigger image, scan and enlarge a paper record or download a digital image to your computer. Usually it is possible to enlarge a downloaded image much more than the genealogy programs will allow. A different approach is to connect your computer to an HDTV via bluetooth or a cable to see a larger, higher-quality image.

With a scanned document, the format matters. JPEGs may degrade over time, so it is best to save the image in another format. Tiffs are very detailed and stable, but the file size is very large. A better choice may be a PNG. A high resolution image will include more detail and sometimes makes the difference between reading accurately and missing the boat, so consider going to a copy center and getting a professional, high resolution scan if you can't do it yourself.

6. Eliminate extraneous marks, intrusive letters from other words, and ink marks that have bled through from the other side of the page in order to make the text you are working on more legible. This can be done digitally using photo-editing software, in Preview on a Mac, or manually using White-out. Enhancing the image digitally by darkening the exposure while increasing the contrast can sometimes clarify the writing and bring out faintly-written or faded text. Using a yellow filter may make microfilm images more readable. A yellow sheet protector can serve as a filter that can be placed over the image on your computer screen. In the case of a digital image, try inserting a digital yellow square over the image and then making it partly transparent with your photo-editing program.

7. Spelling doesn't count in genealogy. Many ancestors were illiterate and spelling was more fluid in the past. Names spelled several different ways may still refer to the same person.

8. Write out the portions of the word or name you are working on, using blanks to indicate indecipherable letters. Seeing the word in this way may help you to identify it. If not, replace the blanks with wildcards (i. e. question marks for each missing letter in a name) and do a search, just for that word, in your preferred genealogy program.

9. Use online tools to figure out what the words say.

- Try using Google. If wildcards don't yield good results, try filling in the blanks with Xs and search again.
- For foreign words, open a Word document and in the Tools menu, choose Language. Select the language you need and then type in whatever you think the word in question says. Then, again in Tools, choose Spelling and Grammar. Word will use a foreign dictionary to find possible spelling alternatives that may help identify what is written.
- Access the appropriate foreign version of Wikipedia which may suggest possible alternatives. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Wikipedias](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias)

10. When looking for locations such as town names where only part of the word is legible, check lists of towns in that state or county for possible matches. This is a hit-and-miss strategy because typically, these lists won't include every town, and those that have been renamed over time or subsumed into larger cities may not appear. Old maps can also be searched for a portion of a name. Also look for headings, seals, and printed or stamped place names on the document.

11. When looking for foreign names, learn a little about spelling conventions for that language. (I'm not suggesting that you actually learn the language, just get a general sense of its dominant characteristics, such as Polish, which uses the letter "j" where we would use an "i.") Many languages attach suffixes to names and numbers, making them look different even though they still refer to the same person or thing, so it pays to have some idea about these as well.

12. Google Translate (<https://www.translate.google.com>) offers some unexpected help with its *pencil tool*. Select English as the language on the left-hand side (or whatever language you need). Look near the keyboard icon for a small triangle and click on it. From the menu that opens, choose "English - Handwrite." In the window that opens, reproduce the word or name that you hope to decipher as closely as you can, using a stylus, your mouse, or your finger on a

trackpad. Below the word you've written, you'll see what Google thinks the word says. Even if it doesn't get the word right, you may gain insight into some of the letters.

13. For words that have partially faded so that the ink comes and goes on the page, making it difficult to read, try filling in the gaps with a pen (on your copy of the record) to replicate as best you can the way the text should have looked before fading.

14. Many words were abbreviated. Look for clues in the form of superscripted letters (written above the rest of the text), colons, or straight or squiggly lines written above the word to indicate contractions and abbreviations.

Handwriting can also help evaluate the likely reliability of a record. For example, if different pens were used, or if the slant of the letters or the pressure seem to vary, the entries were probably written at different times, but if they appear to be written with the same pen and the writing looks consistent, the entries may have all been recorded at the same time, possibly many years after the events took place. If you are looking at a record of family births, check to see if the births are listed chronologically and if they appear to have been written all at once or one at a time. Records created around the time of the event tend to be more reliable.

Consistency of handwriting may also offer clues when trying to compare signatures. One way to determine if different records belonged to the same ancestor is to see if the signatures match, but sometimes someone else signed on their behalf or made a handwritten copy of a record and copied the signature along with the text. If a page has multiple entries and all of the signatures share the same handwriting, it was probably created by a clerk or secretary, so the signature won't match one written by your ancestor, but the information may be their's nonetheless.

## **Resources:**

### **Reading Historical Handwriting**

- Hill, Ronald A. "Interpreting the Symbols and Abbreviations in Seventeenth Century English and American Documents," from A Board for Certification of Genealogists Skillbuilding-Track Lecture. <https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Hill-W141.pdf>
- Kirkham, E. Kay. *The Handwriting of American Records for a Period of 300 Years*. Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1973.
- Sperry, Kip. *Abbreviations Acronyms: A Guide for Family Historians*. 2nd rev. ed., Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com, 2003.
- Sperry, Kip. *Reading Early American Handwriting*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1998.

### **Paleography tutorials: English language (and other languages as well):**

- The National Archives [UK] (<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/>)
- English Handwriting 1500-1700 (<https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/eres/ehoc/>)
- BYU Script Tutorial - This is a great resource but I had a recent problem accessing it: (<https://script.byu.edu/>)

- The Newberry Library: Center for Renaissance Studies. Coverage varies widely, but the languages included are English, Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian (<https://www.newberry.org/paleography>).
- Old German Script Generator (<https://tinyurl.com/y52au5v6>).

### Dictionaries, Abbreviation Guides, and other Aids

- Bailey, N. *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*. 21st edition. London: 1675; Archive.org, (<https://tinyurl.com/yckqndp9>).
- Harrell-Sesniak, Mary. "Understanding Terms Found in Historical Newspapers." *GenealogyBank* blog (<https://tinyurl.com/yaouv5uj3>).
- Morse, Stephen P. "Converting Between Julian and Gregorian Calendar in One Step," *Stevemorse.org*; (<https://stevemorse.org/jcal/julian.html>).
- "List of Frequently Misread Letters." ([https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/List\\_of\\_Frequently\\_Misread\\_Letters](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/List_of_Frequently_Misread_Letters)).
- Russell, Michael, "Dorchester & Fordington Glossary, Index of Terms used in 17th & 18th Century Wills, Inventories and other Documents." 2017. (<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~fordingtondorset/Files/Glossary.html>).
- *Wordmine.info* <https://www.wordmine.info> (<https://www.wordmine.info>) For searching for words in 13 different languages when you can only read some of the letters.

### Historical Writing Manuals

- Fisher, George. *The American Instructor Or Young Man's Best Companion*, Tenth Edition. Philadelphia: Printed by B. Franklin and D. Hall, 1758.
- Jenkins, John. *The Art of Writing, Reduced to a Plain and Easy System*. Cambridge, Mass.: Flagg and Gould, 1813.

### Our Ancestors' Literacy

- Bly, Antonio T. " 'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730-1776. *Early American Studies*, Vol 6, no. 2 (Fall 2008). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; *JStor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).
- Cornelius, Janet. " 'We Slipped and Learned to Read:' Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865." *Phylon*, Vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 171-186. Atlanta: Clark Atlanta University, 1983; *Jstor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).
- Daybell, James. "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters ," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Spring 2010, vol 41, no. 1, pp. 49-67; *JStor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>)
- Dougherty, Mary L. "History of the Teaching of Handwriting in America." *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 280-286. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Dec. 1917; *Jstor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).
- Giaimo, Cara. "The Hidden Messages of Colonial Handwriting." *Atlas Obscura*, 6 May 2016 (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-hidden-messages-of-colonial-handwriting>).

- Main, Gloria L. "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England." *Journal of Social History*, Vol 24, No. 3, pp. 579-589. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, Spring 1991; *Jstor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).
- Monaghan, E. Jennifer. "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England." *American Quarterly*, Mar, 1988, Vol. 40, No. 1, special issue: Reading America, pp 18-44. *Jstor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>). Includes information pertaining to men as well.
- Pearson, Ellen Holmes. "The Standardization of American English." *Teachinghistory.org*. (<https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/25489>).
- Williams, Sarah Rhiannon. "English Vernacular Letters, c. 1400-c.1600: Language, Literacy and Culture." York, England: University of York, Centre for Medieval Studies, December, 2001.
- Yeandle, Laetitia. "The Evolution of Handwriting in the English-Speaking Colonies of America." *The American Archivist*, Summer 1980, pp. 294-311. *Jstor* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).