

Getting Started, Part 6: Reading Old Documents

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Introduction

- Overview
 - Paleography: reading and interpreting old writing and documents
 - Development of alphabets
 - How-To decipher a document
 - Samples and practice
 - Additional resources
- Western European alphabets developed out of an ancient eastern Mediterranean alphabet: Phoenician (c. 1050 BCE). The Greek alphabet developed out of the Phoenician and the Roman/Latin alphabet developed out of the Greek.
 - Roman/Latin is the alphabet used today in much of the world.
- The Cyrillic alphabet, drawing from Greek letter forms, was created in the 9th and 10th centuries in Slavic-speaking areas of Europe.

How to Decipher a Document

- Step 1: Conduct an overview of the document.
 - Are you looking at the original, a digital image, or a photocopy?
 - Who wrote the information? Are there signatures in different styles of handwriting, or were signatures copied by the scribe? This may indicate that the record is a handwritten transcription of another document.
 - Would digitally adjusting the color, brightness, contrast, etc. aid in reading the document? Would any elements of the document you have be lost through making such edits?
 - Note: it is always a good idea to save a copy of a digital document as you found it if you intend to make edits. That way you always have a means to return to the start.
- Step 2: Do the easy parts first.
 - If you don't recognize everything you see, start with the parts you *can* recognize. This will provide a foundation for reading the rest of the document.
- Step 3: Consult tutorials, online tools, and webinars about using such documents and/or learning the handwriting of the period.
 - Consult the BYU Script Tutorial ([Script.byu.edu](https://script.byu.edu))
 - Resources for reading ten different European languages. Resources include alphabet charts, example document transcriptions, grammar explanations, name lists, and much more.
 - It is a project at the [Center for Family History and Genealogy](#), the research lab for the [Family History Program](#) at BYU.
 - Compare letters to an alphabet chart.



- Especially when working with an unfamiliar handwriting style or foreign alphabet, it can be essential to see standard forms and variations of letters.
 - Trace the letters from a sample alphabet to learn the strokes used.
- Step 4: Use the document to decipher itself.
 - Knowing the format of the document before you start reading can help to quickly identify key information within the record. Use guides on script.byu.edu or create your own to help work efficiently through similar documents.
 - Use familiar words or words written multiple times throughout a document to decipher a messy scrawl, unfamiliar abbreviation, or spelling variations.
- Step 5: Collaborate.
 - Working with others is the name of the game in reading old handwriting. Check in the following places for others who may be able to help you work through your difficult documents:
 - FamilySearch Community (especially in groups relevant to your area of research)
 - Facebook groups for genealogy
 - Other family history websites, such as JewishGen, where thematic/country-specific interest groups allow you to work with others
 - Ask friends, family, or others around you—you never know what an extra set of eyes might help you to see, even if they are not the most experienced at reading old documents.
- **PRACTICE!** The only way to read old documents is to do what you did when you learned to read initially: practice. At the end of this syllabus is a list of resources for further practice.

Examples

- English documents in mixed hands (Secretary and Italic)
 - Italic hand is not *italics* as we use today. It is the label for a more connected form of writing that developed in Italy and spread to other parts of Europe after the Renaissance.
 - Secretary hand is the major handwriting style used in English-language documents between 1500 and 1700.
- Spanish-language document
- German document
- Latin document
 - Tips about Latin documents. Due to Catholic record-keeping, many church records across the world were written in Latin, sometimes well into the 20th century
 - Names in Latin documents are often Latinized.
 - Refer to name lists found online and the Script Tutorial to help with this. Example: Jacobus for James.

What about Full-text Search?

Last year FamilySearch rolled out their first batch of full-text searchable documents on FamilySearch Labs (Experiments). Over the course of 2024 they added an enormous number of documents. It is still a work-in-progress but promises to be a game-changer. It allows you to search for everyone named in a document, not just those who were indexed. For example, a deed would have been indexed by buyer and seller; full-text search allows you to discover other people named in the deed.

Even after the laudable work to train a machine to read historical handwriting in multiple languages, humans still need to know how to read pre-1800 scripts. Most projects on Full-text Search come from the 1800s and 1900s, or, if earlier, are written in modern scripts. Documents which were written in earlier scripts or which are difficult to read, still require paleography skills. Over time, with a lot of work on the part of historians, genealogists, and engineers, full-text search will become increasingly accurate. Even then, having basic paleography skills, will prepare you to use these records more accurately and more fully.

- Example of Argentina notarial records

Remember to be patient and kind with full-text searchable – there is a reason it’s in “labs” and “experiments” on FamilySearch. They will continue to refine it as they add more data and as more users take advantage of it and give feedback.

Additionally, the skills you learn reading difficult handwriting will be useful as you have increased access to documents on Full-text Search. Many of these records, such as notarial records, or biographies, might not have been on your to-do list when they weren’t indexed. Now that they are full-text searchable, you’ll want to add them to your list. When you get to the documents, however, you’ll need to know how to decipher the broader context and be able to fill gaps the machine couldn’t read.

- Example of Goathurst, Somerset, England land document

In other words, paleography skills that teach you to slow down, to practice, and to understand context will serve you well in this bright new day of increased access to genealogical information!

Conclusion

- Practice! Practice! Practice!
- You can do this. Practicing with good tools will make you better able to read and accurately interpret documents about your ancestors’ lives.

Additional Resources

FamilySearch’s Research Wiki has handwriting helps for many languages. There are also a handful of research libraries and universities that also offer resources.

- English Language
 - Folger Shakespeare Library paleography tutorial
 - https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Practical_Paleography
 - UK National Archives paleography tutorial
 - <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/palaeography/>
 - Harvard University medieval handwriting resources
 - <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/how-read-medieval-handwriting-paleography>
 - Newberry Library
 - <https://www.newberry.org/research/research-centers/renaissance-studies/paleography>
- Latin
 - UK National Archives paleography tutorial
 - <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/palaeography/>
 - Newberry Library

- <https://www.newberry.org/research/research-centers/renaissance-studies/paleography>
- German
 - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Handwriting
 - Suetterlin Script
 - <http://www.suetterlinschrift.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm>
- Romance Languages
 - Newberry Library
 - <https://www.newberry.org/research/research-centers/renaissance-studies/paleography>
- Scandinavian Languages (including subpages for each language)
 - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Nordic_Handwriting
- Russian
 - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Russia_Handwriting

Information about using Full-text Searchable at FamilySearch.org:

<https://www.pricegen.com/research-with-familysearch-full-text-search-part-2/>

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