Getting Started, Part 4: Reading Old Documents

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Introduction

- Overview
  - Paleography: reading and interpreting old writing and documents
  - Development of alphabets
  - Tips and tricks
  - Samples and practice
  - Additional resources
  - Sponsored by Brigham Young University's Family History Bachelor's Program
- 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 .
- Example of a 17th century document with a promise that you'll be more comfortable reading it by the end of the session.

Tips and Tricks

- Tip 1: Conduct an overview of the document.
  - Are you looking at the original, 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 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 the document as you found it if you intend to make edits. That way you always have a means to return to the start.
- Tip 2: Do the easy parts first.
  - If you don't recognize everything you see, start with the parts you *can* make sense of already. This will help to provide a foundation for reading the rest of the document.
- Tip 3: Consult the BYU Script Tutorial ([Script.byu.edu)](Script.byu.edu)
  - Home of resources for reading ten different languages, the BYU Script Tutorial website is a great one-stop shop for reading old documents. The resources available on the site 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.
- Tip 4: 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.

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- Tip 5: 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, ugly abbreviation, or spelling variation.
- Tip 6: 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 – Demonstrating Using Tips and Tricks
- 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
- Latin document
- German document
- Russian alphabet and document

Conclusion
- Return to 17th century document from the beginning and see what you've learned.
  - Bonus tip – use historical dictionaries.
- You can do this! It just takes practice – with good tools.

Additional Resources
The following are a variety of tools that can be used for help in reading documents in various languages. While this of course is not an all-inclusive list, using these resources in conjunction with the resources available through script.byu.edu should provide a valuable foundation.

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

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- 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

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