Deciphering Old Handwriting

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This presentation focuses on reading old American and English handwriting. Many of the details will also apply to early French, Italian, and Spanish handwriting. German, with its unique script is a different topic, although the first part of the talk has universal tips for tackling old documents.

The Problem

The problem seems obvious: handwriting is difficult to read and understand. When reviewed critically, however, the problem can be broken down into several component parts:

- Unfamiliar letter forms to the 21st-century eye
- Arcane abbreviations
- Spelling that defies current conventions
- Unfamiliar terminology specific to the time period and purpose of the document

The Solution

The solution involves a series of initial steps and then deeper dives into selected topics as needed: letter forms, abbreviations, spelling, and terminology.

Initial Steps

Step #1 - Determine the context of your document. Is it a document prepared by a court, such as probate, or by a government such as a land record, or perhaps by a church? Land, probate, and even church documents tend to have boilerplate language, that is phrases that are common to all similar type documents.

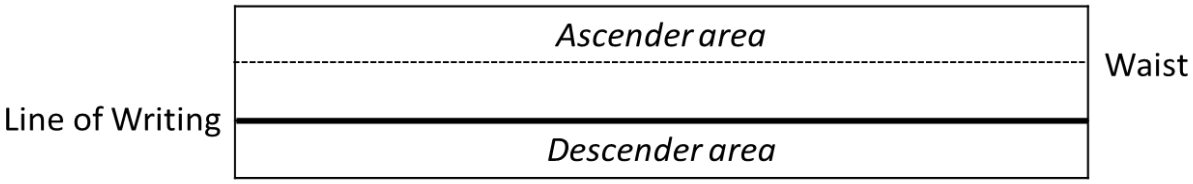
Step #2 - Read through the document and identify unfamiliar letters and words. Use your knowledge of context and boilerplate to piece together some of the difficult words. If a word still eludes you, look for similar letters elsewhere in the document. Find a word you can read that includes the difficult letter. Note the shape of individual letters. Tracing the shape of the letter may also help.

Step #3 - If you still can't make sense of the document—transcribe the text, word for word, preserving the abbreviations, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and any marginal notations. Where you wish to indicate that you can't make out the letters use square brackets [ ] to indicate the missing letters.

Letter Forms

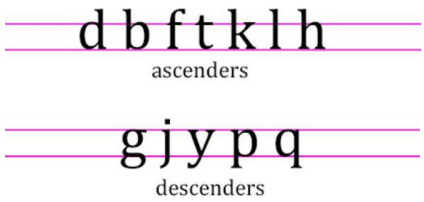
When learning to write, teachers often mark out lines to help the student properly form the letters:

Figure 1: Diagram of the areas of where letters are formed



Some letters usually have ascenders and others have descenders.

Figure 2: Examples of letters with ascenders and letters with descenders



Some other common terms used in handwriting include:

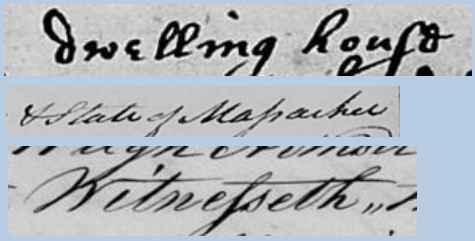
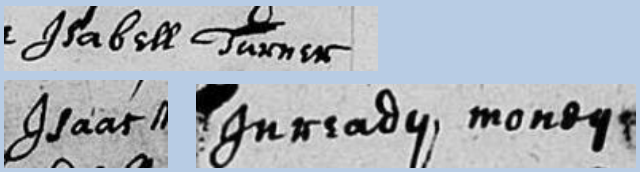
- Miuscule – lower case letters
- Majuscule – upper case letters
- Minums – single downstroke of pen

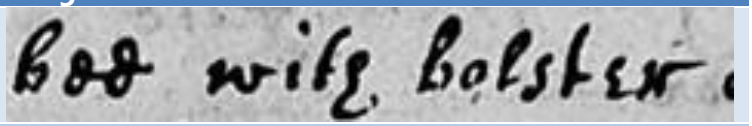
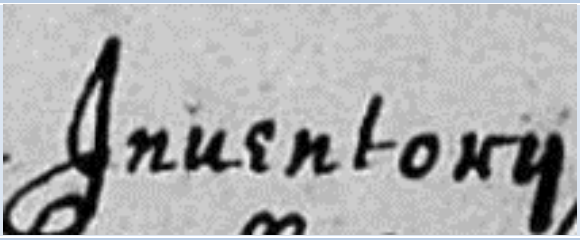
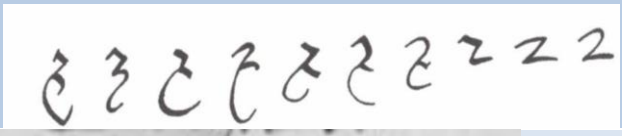
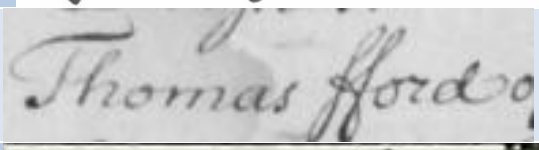
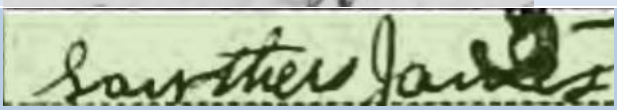
Several lower-case letters are formed with minums, which include the letters I, m, n, u, and w. In some old documents you might find a row of minums without any connectors making it quite challenging to ascertain the word.

Confusing Letters

Letters that are frequently confused are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Frequently Confused Letters

Letter	Problem	Image
s	May look like an "f" especially in the middle of a word	
u and v	Used interchangeably	Diuine (divine) or vpon (upon)
i and j	Used interchangeably (examples are all "I")	

Letter	Problem	Image
e	May look like an "o" with a loop	
h	In early scripts may look like a backwards "3"	See above, looks like "wife" but is actually "with"
r	May be upside down and look like a "u"	
r	When following an "o" or "a" may look like a "z"	
F	Before 1700, a capital "F" was represented by two lowercase 'ffs"	
L vs. S	May look the same	 Transcribed as "S", but actually an "L"

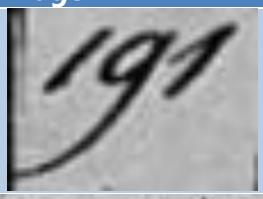
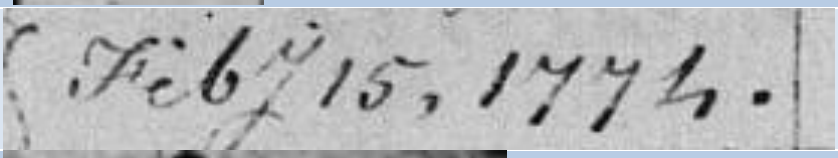
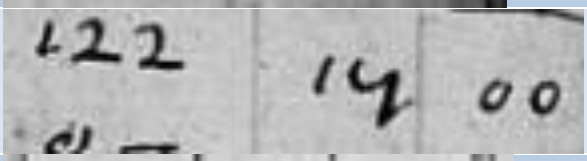
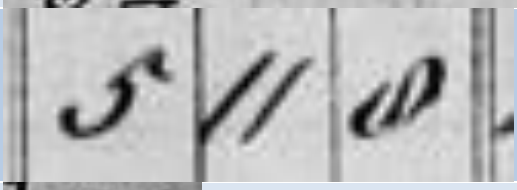
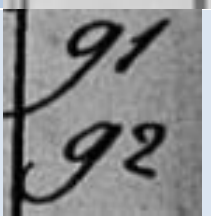
Other common scribe habits that lead to confusion include not crossing a t so it looks like an "l". Or not dotting an "i" in the middle of a word so you have no idea what the letter is. Some scribes enjoy flourishes such as an arch backward across a word when it ends in a "d."

Another confusing pattern is hyphenating a word without the hyphen sign. We, in the 21st century expect a hyphen, but these words don't have one. And the word may be broken at a spot that is for the convenience of the scribe rather than the reader

Confusing Numbers

Confusion caused by unfamiliar numbers are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Frequently Confused Numerals

Numeral	Looks like	Image
1	2, 7 or letter l	
4	6, 7 or letter h	
6	5 or letter b	
7	1, 4, or 9	
8	6, infinity sign, capital S	
9	g	

Roman numerals may appear as in the following table:

Table 3: Roman Numerals

Numeral	What we see	Arabic Number
I	i or j	1
IV	iiij	4
XIV	xiiij	14
XXI	xxj	21

You also need to be aware of how roman numerals are typically represented in older manuscripts. The Roman numeral 1 often appears as a lower case "i" or, if at the end of the numeral, as a lower case "j".

Notice also that a roman numeral IV appears as three lower case "i" followed by a lower case "j."

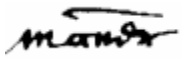
Abbreviations

Scribes frequently used abbreviations in writing. Parchment was expensive and abbreviations saved space. Some abbreviations are specific to the type of document or to the time period. The books listed under "**Resources**," as well as the materials under the heading "Abbreviations" provide assistance.

Specific abbreviations

A specific abbreviation is where the scribe indicates by the symbol what letters have been omitted. For example, a dash or wavy line over a preceding vowel indicates a missing "m" or "n"

Figure 3: Examples of a scribe using a line to indicate missing letters

	manner
	committ

General abbreviations

Two common types of abbreviations are contractions and suspensions. A contraction omits letters in the middle, such as y^r for "your." A suspension omits the end letters after a full stop. Abbreviations may be signaled by superscript letters or by a period or colon.

Figure 4: Examples of contractions – one or more letters missing from the middle of word

s^d	said
y^r	Your
pish	parish

Figure 5: Examples of suspensions – one or more letters missing from the end of a word

:	Jno: = John
Superscript	Jn^o = John
.	Jno. = John

Special abbreviations

Special abbreviations include the famous y^e, the thorn, which has been perpetuated in modern usage as "Ye Olde Gifte Shope."

- Y^e=Thorn=the
- Y^t = that
- D^o=ditto
- &=Ampersand=and

Name abbreviations

Abbreviations for given names were quite common. Most are obvious, but the abbreviation for "Christopher" or "Christian" deserves special mention. It replaces the "Christ" with X(Chi) p(rho) or just the X.

Spelling

Spelling was flexible until the 19th and 20th century. Scribes wrote words based on their education, how the word sounded, and the prevailing conventions. Words may have:

- Single consonants (al vs. all)
- Extra "e" at the end of the word (olde)
- Joins with previous word (thelder, shalbe)

Table 4: Examples of variant spelling

Old Document	Modern Equivalent
doe (e added to end of word)	do
sole	soul
owne (e added to end of word)	own
behoof	behalf
akers	acres
Fenc	fence
deceised	deceased
Howse/hous	House
dyed	Died
Ffoure/foure/fowre	Four
Potts	pots

Another feature of older documents is the inconsistent use of capital letters.

Terminology

The next two tables present terms that may not be familiar but are frequently found in older documents.

Table 5: Latin terms in older documents

Old Documents	Meaning
Viz.	Videlicet; namely
s.p.	Sine prole; without offspring
Imp: or Impris	Imprimis; in the first place
et ux.	Latin for "and wife"
inst.	Instante mense (in this month)
ult.	Ultimo mense (in the past month)
prox.	Proximo mense (in the next month)

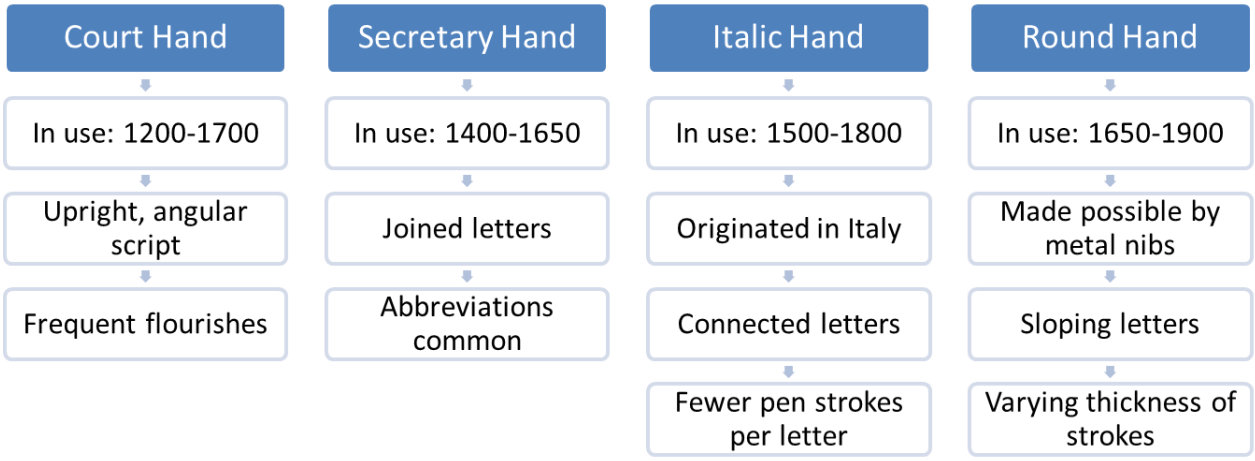
Old Documents	Meaning
Nunc	Nuncupative will – made orally because testator was unable to sign
Accompt	Account
Billows	Bellows – mechanical device to fan a cooking flame
Bole	Bowl
Brother	May be brother-in-law
Sister	May be sister-in-law
Cousin/cosin	Niece or nephew or any relative outside of immediate family
Ffirepan	Iron tray beneath a grate to catch ashes [note the double f to signify a capital letter]
Praised	Appraised at; valued at
Lattin/latten	Mixed metal resembling brass

Advanced Decryption Techniques

Historical Styles

Becoming familiar with historical handwriting styles will allow you to consult characteristic alphabets for each style. The Figure below shows characteristics of several types of writing.

Figure 6: Styles of Writing Through the Ages



Court hand was used by scribes working in legal settings and was in use from the late Middle Ages to the early 1700s. Secretary hand evolved from court hand and was faster to produce. The Italic style originated in Italy and was assimilated into the Secretary Hand. The Round hand was made possible once metal nibs replaced the quill for writing. If you are faced with many documents from a specific period, learning more about the alphabets and styles of each "hand" can be very helpful.

Optical Character Recognition (OCR)

The past 30 years have seen great strides in using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). In the past decade, OCR has been married with artificial intelligence work, machine learning, and other techniques to crack the barrier of deciphering the handwritten word. While most sophisticated applications are only available to those with deep pockets, such as university libraries, industry, a few applications provide decent results to the casual browser of the internet, such as Brandfolder by SmartSheet.

Resources

Getting Started

State Archives of North Carolina, "Style Guide: A Reference for Reading Historic Documents," **https://archives.ncdcr.gov/media/802/open**

Ronald A. Hill, "Interpreting the Symbols and Abbreviations in Seventeenth Century English and American Documents," **https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Hill-W141.pdf**

National Archives **https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/where_to_start.htm**

Online courses, Tutorials, and Games

BYU Script Tutorial **https://script.byu.edu/**

For other Languages see – Brigham Young University - Script Tutorial **https://script.byu.edu/Pages/choices**

Early American Handwriting – a Game **https://www.reed.edu/handwriting/**

English Handwriting Online 1500-1700 - **https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/ceres/ehoc/**

Yale University Library - Quarantine Reading: Learn to Read Secretary Hand **https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/quarantine-reading-learn-read-secretary-hand**

National Archives UK, "Palaeography: reading old handwriting, 1500 – 1800, A practical online tutorial" **https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/**

Books

Hilary Marshall, *Palaeography for Family and Local Historians* (Gloucestershire, UK: Phillimiore & Co LTD, 2004, 2021).

Kip Sperry, *Reading Early American Handwriting* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1998)

Letter Forms and Hands

Online alphabets

Old English Guide

https://www.familysearch.org/indexing/help/handwriting#!/lang=en&title=Old%20English%20Guide%20-%20Introduction

Secretary Hand Alphabet **https://www.familysearch.org/indexing/help/handwriting#!/lang=en&title=Alphabet%20(Secretary%20Hand)**

Secretary Hand **https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/archival-skills/palaeography**

Transcribing

Board for Certification of Genealogists, Skill Building, Transcribing Source Materials **https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-transcribing-source-materials/**

Transcribing tips Citizen Archivist Dashboard - **https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/transcribe/tips**

Abbreviations, terms, and miscellaneous

Dorchester & Fordington Glossary, "Index of Terms used in 17th & 18th Century Wills, Inventories and other Documents," - **https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~fordingtondorset/genealogy/Files/Glossary.html** - very helpful for interpreting items on an old inventory!

Abbreviations for English Given Names
https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Abbreviations_for_English_given_names

Barbara Jean Evans, *A to Zax: A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists and Historians* (Midlothian, VA: Hearthside Press, 1995)

History

History of Handwriting, Hazel Stainer
https://hazelstainer.wordpress.com/2020/07/10/a-history-of-handwriting/

Laetitia Yeandle, "The Evolution of Handwriting in the English-Speaking Colonies of America," *The American Archivist* Vol 43(3), 1980: 294-311 – viewable at JSTOR