

GENEALOGY BASICS: DECIPHERING OLD WRITING

Cathy Andrews, Senior Librarian
Salinas Public Library

PURPOSE

Many original sources we rely on in researching family history are handwritten, and the older the handwriting, the more challenging it can be to understand. Learning the basics about older “hands” can demystify much of the process, and practicing on original documents you’re already accessing can build strong deciphering skills.



SCOPE

Practical tips and persistent practice are fundamental to deciphering skills. Historical context, including knowledge of the styles, the materials, and the vocabulary used in time periods and in professions, can be helpful. We focus on handwriting likely to be found in American documents from the 1700s to the mid 1900s. Paleography, generally understood as the deciphering of ancient or medieval writing, can provide helpful lessons and further background, but is outside our investigation.

STEPS

1. Take time to learn about the hands.

“Hands” are the styles of handwriting used during certain time periods, including some that were specific to a purpose. Keep in mind that a hand was often influenced by those preceding it, and typically the transition lasted for a long time, so it’s helpful to know about those older hands as well. Court hand, for example, was used for legal documents during a preceding time period. Others were developed to be efficient for business use, like Spencerian. Handwriting was not taught universally in American until public education became common in the mid- to late-1800s.

By recognizing the characteristics of the hand, and what time period it is most associated with, you can begin to draw some inferences about the date of a document (keeping in mind that some people continued to use the hand they learned early in life even when most had moved on to a new hand).

**Medieval
to 1700s**

Court Hand

**1500s
to 1600s**

**Secretary
Hand**

**1660s
to 1800**

Round Hand

**1850s
to 1920s**

**Spencerian
Hand**

**1880s
to 1950s**

Palmer Hand

Elizabeth like Collan
petter cum pomenous a
de me z hedibus n
m z hedibus meis
hedes meos pomen



Sir, Aug. 30. 1740.
The great Improvement you have made in the Art of Writing
is a plain Proof of an uncommon Genius; and that Modesty which attends
your Merit has justly gain'd you the Esteem of the Abbot of Ammen.
As you have been pleas'd to favour Me with several Pieces for the
Service of my Universal Penman, I think it incumbent on me to
pay you my grateful Acknowledgments for your friendly Assistance.
However, I must still desire You to write a Piece or Two more for
me in Your legible, free, and expeditious Manner, which, I doubt not, will
answer the Expectations of the most Curious. And the longer you Oblige
me in this Particular, the more acceptable it will be to
Sir, Your most Obedient
Humble Servant

2. Consider the impact of writing materials.

A quill pen has a very different writing stroke than a ballpoint pen or a felt tip pen; goose quills were favored, other kinds not lasting as long or needing sharpening more often. Metal nibs, which needed no sharpening but still had to be dipped in ink, were the next improvement by the 1830s, and the transition away from quills was very rapid. That was followed in the 1850s by the fountain pen, with a reservoir of ink so dipping after every few words was no longer required.

The first ballpoint pens appeared around the time of WWII, and were very expensive, but wrote a clean line and took much longer between refills. It wasn't until the 1960s that an inexpensive, one-use ballpoint was developed, and it revolutionized writing. There are different quality levels in all writing instruments, and blobs of ink or fuzzy writing have a direct impact on deciphering.

Documents written before 1830 were written with quills, with lines showing characteristic thick and thin portions, depending on the pressure exerted by the writer. Metal nibs showed less variation, and ballpoint pens typically show a very consistent line.

The medium being written on makes a difference as well. Parchment and vellum were made from animal hides; linen or other fabric ("rags"), and silk have all been used. Wood pulp is a more modern invention. Each of these materials take the ink in different ways, and present a smoother or coarser texture, which can affect the retention of the ink, and the clarity of the writing.

Historically, ink has been made from organic sources, and varied widely in ease of use, and longevity once written with. Some more modern inks are acidic, and have actually eaten through the paper, while others didn't have enough of a binder, and the ink has fallen off the page.

3. The personal skill and sometimes the health of the writer made a difference.

Clerks, whether in a law office or a factory floor, were expected to have skills, including "writing a fine hand." Other writers may have had limited training or experience. Once universal education was mandated in the US, penmanship was a normal part of many classrooms. Illness or poor eyesight could contribute to poor penmanship, adding to the deciphering challenge all these years later.

4. Many documents followed a set format and used the vocabulary of the profession.

Many legal documents, for example, use stock phrases throughout. When trying to decipher a will, for example, look for the words and phrases that are used in every will of the time period. Knowing how the clerk wrote the letters in the "boilerplate" sections can be used to identify how they shaped letters, which can then be used to compare to less legible sections. For example, wills in the 1700s generally started "In the name of God, Amen" and had other predictable phrases.

Up to the 1830s

Quills

1830s

Metal Nibs

1850s

Fountain Pens

Late 1930s

Ballpoint Pens

1960s

Mass Manufactured Ballpoints

5. Get familiar with the "things to watch out for."

Certain letters have had different formats, or mimicked other letters. "I" was not considered a stand-alone letter, and often looks exactly the same as "J". The same was true for "U" and "V". Depending on the hand, the letters "C," "L," and "S" can look very similar.

What looks to our eye like the letter "y" with a superscript "e" (y^e) and is often treated as "ye" is in fact the old alphabet symbol known as "thorn," which stands in for "th", and so this is the word "the". Because "the" is perhaps the most common word in the English language, this hint can help start the process of sorting out the first pass through a new document.

The "long s" is an antiquated form of the lowercase "s" that is mainly used as the first letter in a double "s" within a word, though it can be used on it's own in older records. This can lead to confusion, for example, when seeing a name like Russell in a record, it is often misinterpreted as Rufus because of the "long s".

Abbreviations are commonly used. Writing by hand is a laborious process, and abbreviations saved time, especially for common words in stock phrases. The writer often gives us a signal when something is abbreviated, with the end of the word raised as a superscript, often with an underline or two dots under the superscript. There are abbreviations we are still using (Dr., Mr., Tues) but others may be unexpected. Sometimes the writer had their own abbreviations. Often the context of the document or the sentence will help make it clear what the word is.

Spelling was very fluid before the late 1800s, when spelling books became a more common part of education. It is not unusual for the same word to be spelled more than one way in the same document, and sometimes in the same sentence. Much of the variety in spelling reflects the pronunciation of the word, and sometimes saying the word out loud can assist in deciphering it. It was common to have added letters, dropped letters, and substituted sounds.

6. Use the documents you are already accessing to add to your skills.

It's good practice when reviewing documents like the Census, to review the page before and the page after, to see if there are relatives or other familiar names. While you're doing that, pay attention to the handwriting of the clerk. Read each name and work out any that are confusing. Occupations can be a good one to check, as there were many jobs that are unfamiliar or just gone today. The occupation that looks like "Clap clutter" at first may jump out as "Glass cutter" when you apply your decoding skills, and you will have racked up more experience to help when deciphering a record with more importance to your research.

RELATED AREAS/SKILLS

You can build deciphering skills in several important ways. As you learn more about a geographic area you're researching, you'll build knowledge of common surnames, occupations, and towns. Having a set of most common words will help quickly decipher those and will give examples to compare more challenging words to.

CONTACT

Cathy Andrews

Senior Librarian at Salinas Public Library
(831) 758-7915 | CathleenA@ci.salinas.ca.us



RESOURCES

Knowing that website links are often updated or abandoned, making it difficult to maintain relevant lists of sites, it's helpful to think about the search terms that are likely to be most effective in tapping the many deciphering resources on the internet. This is one place where "paleography" comes in useful, as it's a quick start to find many sites that may include more recent writing info. And in most cases, the principles that go into deciphering cross the limits of time periods.

Other search terms include the names of the various hands, or phrases such as "reading old documents." The Wikipedia pages for many hands, document types, and materials often have great links at the end of the article to the sources used, which may in turn provide further clues to broaden the search.

YouTube has a number of helpful videos showing everything from how quill pens were made, to contemporary demonstrations of writing in various hands. Use similar search terms as those used in the internet searches above.