

Reading Older Documents

The following information on how to read older documents is reproduced by courtesy of The National Archives, London, England.

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Reading

When reading modern text, we generally identify whole words at a glance. Look at this sentence:

The huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. The oredr of the ltteers in the wrod can be in a total mse but you can sitll raed it wouthit any porbelm.

While this way of reading and comprehending whole words at a glance is very useful in the modern world, it can lead to incomprehension and mistakes when trying to read documents written in an old and unfamiliar style of handwriting.

Be prepared to tackle an old document letter by letter if necessary. If you cannot identify a letter, leave it out, or put in a suggestion of what you think it is, perhaps with a question mark by it. Do a few more lines and then go back to see if you can now identify the letter. Or see if you have already come across it and understood it somewhere else in the document.

Standard Phrases

Knowing the background to the document will help enormously with reading the handwriting. Many types of documents contain standard phrases or formulas. It is much harder to read a document if you do not know what kind of document it is. If you know the phrases which are likely to appear in a particular document, you will be able to read them easily when they appear. You can then use the phrases which you are certain about to help decipher other words.

Transcribing

When copying a document always transcribe: this is when you retain the original spellings. Do not translate, this is when the words are changed into modern spelling. When you expand a word which was abbreviated in the original text (see [abbreviation](#) section) put the letters

that you have added in square brackets []. This way, when you no longer have the original in front of you, you will know which letters appear in the original document and which ones you have added.

Spelling

Spelling in English was not standardised until the 18th century. Before then, words were often spelt phonetically (as they sound) and in local dialects. Vowel sounds in particular could be written in a variety of different ways, depending on how the writer said the word. A writer would often spell the same word in different ways in one document.

Archaic words: You may find that you have transcribed a word perfectly, and yet still not know what it says. In this case it is important to look in a good dictionary, as the word may be one which has fallen out of modern use. Often however it is merely a matter of saying the word out loud - although you should take your regional dialect into consideration if you decide to try this! Look at this word:

belhaus

Out of context, you might think this is a bell tower. However, it appeared in an inventory of someone's kitchen, so it had to be something which the average person would have in their kitchen. Try saying it out loud. The word in modern spelling is:

bellows

Also take into consideration the following:

- Use of **y** for **i**, for example *myne* = mine.
- Interchangeable **i** and **j**. *John* = John. *Maiestie* = Majesty.
- Interchangeable **u** and **v**, such as *euer* = ever. *vnto* = unto
- Long 's'. Don't get long **s** and **f** mixed up. The 'f' will have a cross stroke, even if it's hardly noticeable, and the context will make it clear whether it is a long 's' or an 'f'. Writers would often use both long and short 's', sometimes even in the same word.
- Use of a single consonant where you would find two in modern English, such as *al* - all.
- Use of two consonants where you would find one in modern English, such as *allways* - always.
- Minims. A minim is a single downstroke of the pen. An 'i' is therefore one minim, an 'n' or 'u' is made up of two minims, and a 'm' three. In modern handwriting, where each letter is individually formed and the 'i's are dotted, these letters do not cause any problems of comprehension. But in old handwriting, particularly in cursive hands, where the writer was writing very quickly and possibly not forming the joining strokes, they can be very hard to tell apart.



One way to deal with this, if it is not clear what the letters are, is to count the minims and work out the combinations of letters they could represent. From the context of the rest of the

sentence, you should be able to work out the word. Use your common sense - even if a word really does look like *thmg*, no such word exists, so it must be *thing*.

Abbreviations

Readers of old documents will very quickly come across what look like very strange squiggles and dashes above or in between letters. These are actually abbreviation marks - they have been put in by the writer to show that he or she has deliberately omitted one or more letters. This was done for two reasons - for speed of writing, and to save space on the page, as parchment was very expensive.

Abbreviations were standard across Europe, and any educated person would have understood them at a glance. A modern equivalent would be this abbreviation sign:

@ which means 'at', and is recognised by everyone today.

Forms of abbreviation in common use 1500 - 1800.

- Suspension - a letter or letters (often followed by a full stop) which represent a word.

.M. for majesty

Lo. for Lord

This type of abbreviation is commonly used today, for example, BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation.

- Omission of 'm' or 'n'. This is represented by a dash or wavy line written over the preceding vowel. The context will make it clear whether it is an 'm' or 'n'.


demad - demand

- Omission of 'i'. This is represented by a dash or wavy line over the following 'o'.

commisson - Commission

It is worth noting that the location of the dash or wavy line may not always follow this rule. The author of the document may choose instead, to put the dash at the end of the word on the final 'n'.

- 'P' abbreviations

 - per or par

 person or parson

Ɔ - pro

Ɔvide provide

Ɔ - pre

Ɔsent present

- Abbreviation for 'es', 'is', 'ys', to denote a plural

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to denote a plural

oateƆ oates

- Superscript letters
 - **w^t** - with
 - **w^{ch}** - which
 - **M^r** - Master (not 'Mister' at this time).
- Use of the Old English 'th' letter, called a thorn, which looks like a 'y'
 - **y^e** - 'The'. Note that this is pronounced exactly like 'the' in modern speech. It is not pronounced 'Ye', as in 'Yes'. Any modern café calling itself 'Ye olde tea shoppe' is actually perpetuating the Old English 'th' symbol.
- When completing these exercises transcribe y^e as the and y^t as th[a]t.

When you come across a new abbreviation sign, you may wish to make a note of it for future reference. The main reference book for abbreviations is C.T. Martin, 'The Record Interpreter' (republished Kohler and Coombes, 1976), which you should be able to find in most reference libraries.

Further information on palaeography and online tutorials can be found [here](#).