What does that say?
Deciphering Handwriting in Genealogical Documents

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Deciphering difficult handwriting, regardless of the era of the document, is a skill that takes some practice, but it will improve over time. Start slow, be patient with yourself, and be willing to take a break from staring at a document for too long.

Basic Tips & Suggestions

- Document Identification
  - What kind of document is it, and what time period is it from?
  - Become familiar with "standard language" used in certain documents (ex: deeds, wills, church records, etc.)
- Compare, contrast, & look for context clues
  - Read through the entire document and compare the sections, words, and letters that you can read with those that you cannot.
  - The content of the entire document can often help you determine what the words you are having trouble with say.
- Use Resource Guides – *See the FamilySearch Research Wiki section below.*
  - Word Lists & Dictionaries
  - Language Guides
  - Gazetteers & Place Name Guides
- Make a copy of the original for notations
  - Drawing lines between letters
  - Writing the words legible words to help you compare the illegible words can help.
- Create a transcription
  - This can help you work through a difficult to read document and provide a copy that will be easier to quickly reference in the future.
- Digitally enhance the image
  - Enlarge it on your computer and adjust the brightness and contrast to create a (hopefully) more legible image.
- Don't be afraid to get another opinion!

Periodical Source Index (PERSI) Articles on Handwriting
- https://www.genealogycenter.info/persi/

FamilySearch Research Wiki:
- Genealogical Word Lists:
    - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Genealogical_Word_Lists
- Gazetteers:
    - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Gazetteers
- Italian Handwriting:
    - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Italy_Handwriting

BYU Script Tutorial: https://script.byu.edu/
- English
- German
- Dutch
- Spanish
- Portuguese
- Latin
- French
- Italian
- Alphabet charts: https://script.byu.edu/Pages/the-english-documents-pages/en-alphabet

Where to find Gazetteers:
- Libraries & Archives
    - Search https://www.worldcat.org/ for physical books near you
    - Don't forget about digital collections!
- Internet Archive – https://archive.org/
- FamilySearch Books (check the research wiki as well)
    - https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/
- Google Books – https://books.google.com/
- Hathi Trust – https://www.hathitrust.org/
- Ancestry "Maps, Atlases, & Gazetteers" collection
    - https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/44/

"Translating Secretary Hand," Genlinks Genealogy Help
- http://www.jaydax.co.uk/genlinks/translatingsecretaryhand.htm

<u>Free Online Photo Editing</u>
- Canva – https://www.canva.com/
- Pixlr – https://pixlr.com/editor/

<u>Other Resources:</u>

Drake, Paul. *What Did They Mean By That? A Dictionary of Historical and Genealogical Terms, Old and New.* Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1994. <u>ACPL Call#:</u> 929 D78W.

Evans, Barbara Jean. *A to ZAX: A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists & Historians.* Alexandria, VA : Hearthside Press, 1995. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929.03 EV15AA.

Grieve, Hilda E. P. *Examples of English handwriting, 1150-1750 : with transcripts and translations.* Essex, England: Essex Education Committee, 1954, 1974 printing. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 942 G874E.

Hoskin, Philippa M. *Reading the past: sixteenth and seventeenth century English handwriting: facsimiles, transcripts & reading notes.* York: Borthwick, 2001. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929.168 SP242LDS

Hutton, Sarah. *How to read old handwriting: the essential guide.* London, National Archives UK. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929 H979HO.

Jerger, Jeanette L. *A Medical Miscellany for Genealogists.* Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1995. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929 J47M.

Kirkham, E. Kay. *How to read the handwriting and records of early America.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929 K63HWB

Marshall, Hilary. *Palaeography for family and local historians.* Chichester, West Sussex: Phillimore, 2004. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 411.7 M355PA.

Mashey, Anne B. *A guide to olde German handwriting of the mid-1800's: for genealogists, researchers, antiquers.* Wexford, PA: A. Mashey, 1979. <u>ACPL Call #:</u> 929 M37G.

Minert, Roger P. *Deciphering handwriting in German documents : analyzing German, Latin, and French in historical manuscripts.* Provo, Utah : GRT Publications, 2013. ACPL Call #: 943 M662DEA

Schober, Katherine. *Tips and tricks of deciphering German handwriting: a translator's tricks of the trade for transcribing German genealogy documents.* 2018. ACPL Call #: 929 SCH61TI.

Simpson, Grant G. *Scottish handwriting, 1150-1650: an introduction to the reading of documents.* Edinburgh, Bratton Publishing Ltd, 1973. ACPL Call #: 941 SI58S

Sperry, Kip. *Abbreviations & Acronyms: Guide for Family Historians.* 2nd rev. ed. Provo, UT: Ancestry Pub., 2003. ACPL Call #: 929 SP37RB 2003.

Sperry, Kip. *Reading Early American Handwriting.* Baltimore : Genealogical Publishing, 1998. ACPL Call #: 929 SP37R.

Stuart, Denis. *Latin for Local and Family Historians.* Chichester, West Sussex : Phillimore, 1995. ACPL Call #: 478.2 ST91LA.

Szabados, Stephen. *Polish genealogy: four steps to success.* United States: CreateSpace, 2013. ACPL Call #: 929 SZ12PO.

Zaner, C. P. *The Zanerian manual of alphabets and engrossing; an instructor in round hand, lettering, engrossing, designing, pen and brush art, etc.* Columbus, OH: Zaner & Bloser co, 1918. https://www.loc.gov/item/18009979/.

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