

Handwriting – tips for reading handwritten documents

In these days of Web 2.0 and the use of high tech tools and databases which can answer research queries in an instant, the challenge presented by reading and interpreting handwritten archival documents often comes as a surprise to first time researchers. In fact interpreting old handwriting can be a laborious and time consuming task for even the most experienced.

Sometimes this is because the handwriting is illegible which can appear in documents of any time period! However, it can also be because of the writing styles and conventions used in older records, such as those from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are so different from those used today.

CERTIFICATE OF FREEDOM.

No. *31/1043*
 Date, *20 October 1831*

Prisoner's No. —
 Name, — *Patrick Hayden*
 Ship, — *Recovery*
 Master, — *Fotherley*
 Year, — *1823*
 Native Place, — *Queen's County*
 Trade or Calling, — *Servant*
 Offence, — *Picking pockets*
 Place of Trial, — *City Dublin*
 Date of Trial, — *9 October 1822 per Mr*
 Sentence, — *Seven years*
 Year of Birth, — *1801*
 Height, — *5 feet ^{3 inches} $\frac{1}{4}$ inches*
 Complexion, — *Ruddy*
 Hair, — *Brown*
 Eyes, — *blue*
 General Remarks, — *Scar on right side of head. Small white wart under left eye, blue speck on back of left hand. Lost one front tooth in upper jaw, was transported to Moriton bay for three years by the Penwith Bench 2 Sept. 1828, for repeatedly absconding and being otherwise incorrigible.*

*New Roads - Sydney 20 13. Dec. 1833
 & 28 Nov. 1834. New Roads P.O. Newcastle
 Australia*

1. Strategies

General

- Compare similar types of documents, if possible those written by the same person as some aspects of style can be idiosyncratic to an individual.
- Spend time comparing the words and letters in a document to those around them.
- Compare letters or combinations of letters with those in a known word.
- Check the position, start, middle or end of a word and look for combinations which may be one or more letters. For example 'incorrigible' has 'in' at the start but elsewhere these letters might have been confused with 'm'. Often 'n' and 'u' look similar, as do 'h' and 'k'.
- Often the more time you spend reading a document the clearer it will become, sometimes it's a good idea to come back to it after a break.
- Show the document to someone else without telling them what you think it says.
- Use common sense, more often than not the simple explanation is the correct one.
- If all else fails give it to a person over the age of 70 (e.g. your grandmother) or an experienced person from a local historical society.
- Persistence is the key.

Transcribing from copies

- Be wary of transcribing from photocopies (especially if the original is in pencil) as the crosses in capital F, for example, can be hard to spot and they get transcribed as T.
- If relying on digital images make sure they are very high resolution so you can zoom in to the detail where you might pick up subtle pen strokes not otherwise visible.

Reading cross writing

- Where there is cross writing in a document (i.e. a second layer of writing written at a 90 degree angle to the text), turn the letter so that the writing you are trying to read is at the top of the page.

Don't take other transcriptions at face value

- If the document has been indexed don't take the indexers word for it that the keywords have been read correctly. I recently got a death certificate for a Chinese person where surname had been indexed as Ah Pook but when I viewed the original it was clearly Ah Fook. Same applied to Lee Sing it was actually Lee Ling (in some handwriting capital L can be mis-read as capital S)



2. Useful equipment

- Use a magnifying glass.
- In a blank piece of paper cut a slit or window the length and width of one line of text. Scroll it down over the text line by line. This is particularly useful to decipher cross writing. This eliminates most of the confusing background to the text under examination.

3. Tips about lettering, symbols and abbreviations

Lettering

- A letter may be written differently depending on its position in the word. In the example given the letter 'r' in 'brown' is written differently to the letter 'r' at the end of 'October' and is different again in 'ruddy'.
- Capital letters have different forms to non-capital letters.
- Try making a sheet onto which you copy the style in which key identifiable letters are written and build up an "alphabet" for that persons handwriting. As you get a feel for it, unidentified letters will probably fit into those you have yet to identify.

- Where there is a double “ss” in a word this will often appear as “fs” in cursive handwriting in older documents, this is known as the leading S.
- The German ‘ß’ looks similar to a leading S.

Abbreviations

- Ditto is a term that means “the same as stated above or as before”. It is often expressed with two lines (“”) or (do.), which means that the word, figure or phrase above is to be repeated.
- Be aware of abbreviations (sometimes words that have been abbreviated later can be found written in full together with the abbreviation at the beginning of a document).
- Given names and Family names are commonly abbreviated in documents, such as Chas for Charles or Thos for Thomas.
- Use of suffixes for names such as Junior (Jr.) or Senior (Sr.) or Roman numerals II or III varied according to whether people were living or dead.
- Look out for Latin words and phrases as these are commonly used.
- Obedient might be abbreviated to “obt.”
- Where documents such as inquests refer to dates on which things happened or will happen, you may find abbreviations such as inst. (instant) prox. (proximo) and ult. (ultimo). Instant will refer to a date in the same month in which the document is written (e.g. I went to visit him on the third inst.) Proximo is the next month, Ultimo is the previous month.
- a lower case c with a slanted stress mark above it stands for “with”.

Symbols

- When money is being recorded the columns may not be headed with the symbols for pounds, shillings and pence (£ s. d.), i.e. there may be unheaded columns of numbers.



4. Use reference tools and resources

Place names

- Look out for place names that may have changed over time, just because it isn't in a street directory today doesn't mean your interpretation is wrong. It may be necessary to consult geographical dictionaries and old place name guides. If you are looking for a place in New South Wales the Geographical Names Register is a handy online resource. (N.B. Geographical Names Register does not necessarily hold information on old or obsolete place names. For example the small mining town Argenton near Emmaville was active for 10 years but there is no trace of it on the Geographical Names Broad but the Aregenton at Lake Macquarie is listed.)

Use expert sources and dictionaries

- Consult expert sources on a particular type of record e.g. our publications Convict Guide has a *Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations* and dictionaries on Law, Medicine and Finance are always useful.
- One point of interest is that some legal documents have terms that are not now in general use or standard phrases. For example old systems titles almost always had a reference to buildings and other things which is a stock phrase whether or not the land had buildings on it. It does not indicate that a building such as a house was on the land or not it merely covers the situation where a house or other buildings or

fences ...etc were on the land. I have found that purchasing a few of the older legal texts helps understand Old System titles and selection files because in those days old documents were often encountered by lawyers.

- If you are reading inquests, medical records, hospital admissions or death certificates there is a great website for old medical terms with examples of them written in old handwriting. It is Rudy's List of Archaic Medical Terms

Consult experts

- If you can track down someone who has knowledge of the subject matter and arcane abbreviations it can help to flick them a scan of the document. Amateur historians are usually willing to help.

When in doubt try Google

- Once you have worked out what two or three words are which may be key to solving the puzzle, putting those two or three words into Google search can yield a something about the subject matter or something about the person concerned which help to decipher other relevant details. If you know what words to look for, it makes it easier to recognise them in the old script.

Other Useful Tools

In some cases, however, it may be necessary to learn more about older writing, spelling and grammatical conventions to ensure handwriting is interpreted correctly. Fortunately there are a number of handy tools on the web that can give you a crash course.

- A brief rundown of some of the common tips and tricks for deciphering old handwriting can be found in the following article on "Old Handwriting in Genealogy Research" by Sabina J Murray.
- The National Archives in the United Kingdom has a wonderful practical online tutorial on translating English documents written between 1500-1800. Then when you've finished you can test your new found expertise in the ducking stool game.
- If you are interested in pursuing things a bit further and practising your transcription skills on some well known verses and correspondence the Cambridge English Renaissance Electronic Service (CERES) presents a more in depth online course on *English Handwriting 1500-1700*.

(N.B. While these tools are based on an earlier time period than that covered by most Australian archival collections, many of the lessons learnt can be carried forward.)

Acknowledgement

These tips were first published on our Archives Outside blog. In the post we "consulted the brains trust here for some of their top hints for interpreting handwritten documents based on the most frequently asked questions over the years...[and also] incorporated the tips provided by contributors in the comments..." With acknowledgements to Gail Davis, Lindsay Allen, Richard Gore, Janette Pelosi, Bob Meade, Julie Hallett, David Hunter, Lee, Susan Walter, Pat & Iain Stuart.

This content is maintained by Public Access. If you have any queries or feedback about this content please contact Public Access.