Transcribing – Let's Be Accurate

Diane L. Richard looks at the importance of precision when transcribing documents for historical accuracy

Whether you are transcribing documents for your own use, or to share, for a website, or for a genealogical journal or similar publication, ACCURACY is key.

We transcribe documents to gain/provide greater access to the content and a transcribed version is easier to use. Though transcribing can be challenging (horrible handwriting, faded, torn and stained documents, uncommon spelling and language, etc.), the result is invaluable. That said, the simple concept of transcribing can often be frustrating and stymy even the most dedicated and experienced genealogist.

Overall, we want to be accurate in our transcriptions and, we want to reduce the amount of INTERPRETATION that we incorporate.

The following is based on my role as editor for two genealogical journals. I quickly learned that many of the elements stated are ideas that I take for granted and are not necessarily as intuitive to others. I also learned that "the devil is in the details". I can convey an element about transcribing and, if not careful, I find it can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. It was also reinforced that many of us are very visual, so "seeing" exactly what something in a document might look like in the original format, and in the transcribed version, really helped my group of volunteer transcribers become quite proficient in being uniform in how they transcribed – a real bonus for any journal editor.

Let's start with some key ideas, which may seem obvious, and yet, are so often ignored! In all cases DO:

- EXACTLY what you see.
- Include EVERYTHING.
- NOT interpret.
- NOT normalize spelling – keep spelling AS IS.
- KEEP names spelled as is – if spelled three different ways, you also spell it three different ways.
- NOT expand abbreviations (keep Oct or Octr, do NOT spell out as October).
- NOT "repeat" words where you see Ditto, Do, D^o or " " – do exactly what you see. Ditto is a surname!
- KEEP superscripted letters, e.g., Jn^o, Alex^r, Esqr, Cap^n.
- Be CAREFUL of Jas [Jos] [J?s] Jones – it's easy to confuse vowels and certain consonants.
- KEEP capitalization or lack thereof as you see it, regardless of how much it bothers you, e.g., alexander, House – often proper names are presented in lower case and capitalization is often seemingly randomly interspersed throughout a document.
- NOT re-arrange material unless unavoidable (massively wide or long document that has to be split to fit modern page sizes).
- NOT re-state dates into the format you are most comfortable with. It is not unusual to find in 18th and earlier century documents given in many different formats – how many years after independence, Quaker format, month-day-year as is common for us, etc.
- Indicate EXACTLY how someone signed – signature, mark as an "X" or some other type of mark. There is more than one way you can indicate the nature of a mark (see the Abram/Abraham example).

View a free video on this topic – "Accurate transcriptions for historical Records" by the North Carolina Genealogical Society, *www.ncgenealogy.org/accurate-transcriptions-historical-records*.

● KEEP punctuation (or lack thereof) as is, e.g., no commas or commas where you wouldn't put them. You will find much less punctuation than we are used to. Fewer periods, fewer commas, etc. RESIST the temptation to add in missing punctuation.

● KEEP the "long s.". The long s often looks like an ornate "f" next to an S and is often (though not always) the equivalent of what ss is for us today, e.g., Afsembly = Assembly, Afsefsor = Assessor, Acrofs = Across, Ifsued = Issued, etc. Not everyone agrees with this. My feeling is that we are attempting to re-create a document and not interpret it. There are situations where we might confuse what we think is a long s + s with what is actually a word ending in f which is a plural. Additionally, I have seen situations where even for a single s, a "long s" has been used and that is often confused with an f.

● NOT re-order information.

● INCLUDE ~~crossed out text~~, insertions, <u>under-lined text</u>, etc. – if you CANNOT accurately visually represent alterations, then include a note of explanation. A method for indicating inserted text – text seemingly inserted between two lines of text where the author realized that they were missing a word or phrase – is to use carrots (^) with words/phrases in parentheses. For example – On the Comptrolers ^ (Books) and he ^ (is) informed that Henry – indicates that the words Books and is were inserted above the main row of text.

● USE question marks (?) to indicate indecipherable letter(s) or word(s) (e.g. ?abra or Mu?rry).

● USE questions marks (?) after a word or use (sp?) to indicate that you are uncertain of the spelling OR do something like Matt/Mati to indicate that you have confidence that one of two spellings is correct.

● PUT words in square brackets (indicating something NOT in the original text) like [illegible] [torn] [hole] [stained] [tightly bound] to indicate the condition of a document or portion of a document that might prevent transcription.

● ADD in notations, observations, clarifications, relevant supplemental information, references consulted, questions that you as the transcriber have, and more – use color highlighting, comment bubbles or other visual means to convey your contributions/additions to what was the original text.

*Signature and Signing with a mark – make sure to indicate.*
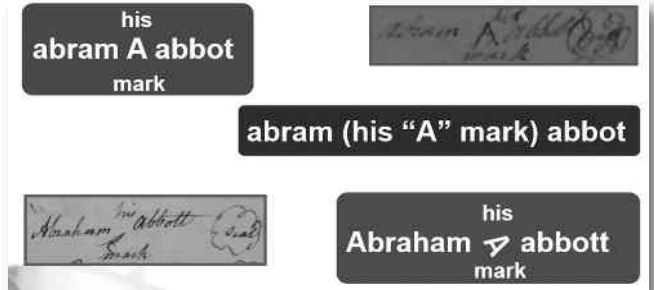
Different ways to indicate the style of a mark.
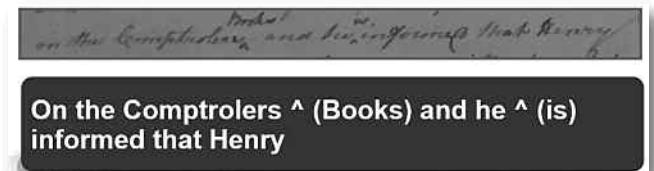
Sometimes we see where the author has put text above or off to the right or left that was accidently not included where it "should have" been place. A carrot (^) and parentheses ( ) can be used to delineate such text.

Example of a torn document – certain lines are NOT able to be transcribed and so inserting [torn] for the missing words or names is appropriate.
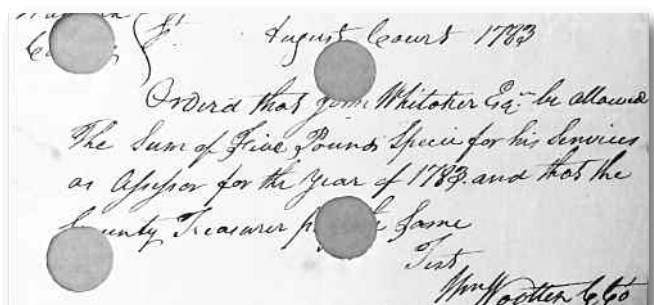
Example of a document with punched holes, often used to indicate that "cancelled" once payment has been provided. Again, certain words may not be legible and inserting [hole] is appropriate.

- Transcribe the REVERSE side.
- Use [sic] SPARINGLY – we know there will be misspelled words, we know there are punctuation and capitalization issues, etc. Only use it where there is an actual error in meaning or presentation (e.g., you've read ten documents written by the same clerk from the same day for the same type of matter and in one a line was missed or an incorrect word inserted). We want to resist interpretation. Preferable to adding in [sic] is to add a notation to call out the perceived error and what the correction would be; thus, keeping the transcription as an accurate representation of the original document.

Now, none of that sounded so difficult, did it?

There are some non-tech tools/techniques that might prove helpful:

- Look beyond the letter/word you cannot read; it might be found somewhere else in an easier to read/understand context.

- Use other contemporary documents to facilitate, e.g., for a 1786 petition, look at the 1790 census or research the names of county officials.

- Read the document out loud and try to sound out the word exactly as written. Clerks often wrote words, as we would today for an unknown word, phonetically based on what they think they heard.

- For your first pass, focus on the letter and words that you can easily read/decipher. Do NOT be afraid to skip words that challenge you. As you read more of a person's handwriting and in words where the context makes certain words quite clear, then, you can revisit the words you skipped and odds are that you are now better able to decipher them. And, if you can't, that is what ???s and [illegible] are designed for.

- Ask someone else to look at the word. It's not unusual when at an archives, for researchers to query one or more people to help them

Sometimes modifying an image using photo editing software can make what seems to be an illegible document easier to read.

decipher a word. You can do the same with your transcription. We just don't all always see things the same way.

There are also some tech tools that can facilitate:

- Use the zoom feature on your computer, tablet, etc.
- Employ easy photo editing software (many free options) to heighten contrast, sharpen, brighten or change

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RESOURCES

Abstracting (About.com) *http://genealogy.about.com/od/basics/a/abstracting.htm*

Transcribing (Genealogy 101),
http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~florian/genealogy101/g_101_transcribing-documents.htm

Transcribing Guidelines (Cyndi's List), *www.cyndislist.com/transcribing/guidelines*

26 Tips for Transcribing and Abstracting (Colonial Roots),
http://colonialroots.com/2015/04/genealogy-101-26-tips-for-transcribing-and-abstracting-genealogy-records

Genscriber (FREE tool for personal & non-profit use), *www.genscriber.com/genapps*

Transcribing Historical Documents (FamilySearch Wiki),
http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Transcribing_Historic_Documents_(National_Institute)

BCG document samples, *www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/docsamples.html*#

FamilySearch "Indexing Test Drive" ... it's not the same and some of the same issues obviously come up when one is indexing that are the same as when transcribing,
http://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/FHD/product/en/familySearch_indexing/TestDrive/multiscreen.html

Online for pay course, *www.genealogicalstudies.com* -- Skills: Transcribing, Abstracting & Extracting course -- part of Module 1, possibly part of Module 2 (albeit briefly)

the colors on a document – sometimes these edits create an easier-to-read version of the original.

● Create tables for information – using either Excel or Word or other spreadsheet or publishing programs. These are a handy way to organize non-narrative text, such as lists of signatures, ledger contents, etc. – improves layout and makes for easy editing.

● If possible, use two monitors such as your laptop and another screen. This allows you to ensure that the original document is as large as possible on one screen while your software program (where you are creating the transcription) is on the other.

● Use a software package dedicated to transcribing such as Genscriber (free for non-commercial use), *www.genscriber.com/genapps*.

● Not familiar with how to create superscripts, highlight text, insert comments, creating tables (in spreadsheet or word-processing programs) or use other features of your preferred spreadsheet or publishing software, just do a search on the web or for YouTube videos. Odds are that whatever question of "how" to use your software you have, there is an answer online!

● Remember our previous discussion about the "long s?" I suggest a search of the Internet for this symbol or other needed items such as a "British Pound Symbol" or other symbols we rarely use.
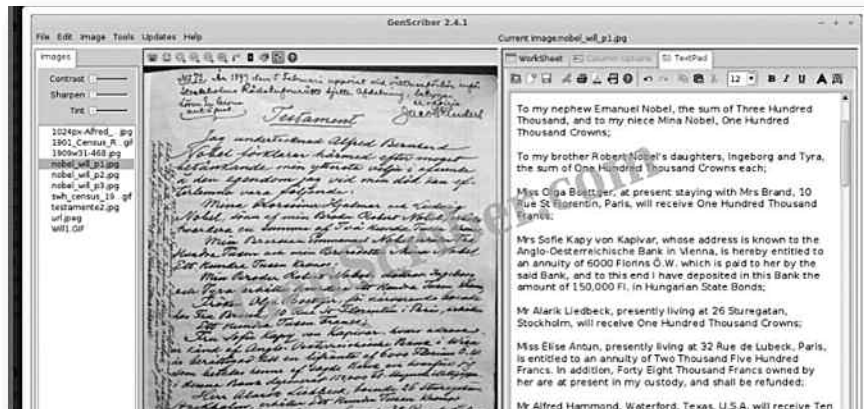
A software program such as Genscriber, dedicated to transcribing documents, has a built in feature where you can see the document and your transcription side-by-side.

The "long s" and other symbols, if not readily available on your computer, can be easily found via a simple Internet search.

Relax. Sometimes this simple yet complex activity stresses people out. At a certain level, remember that whatever you transcribe is creating visibility and access to records often previously unavailable to researchers. That makes any transcribing that you do, invaluable! As researchers, we know to ALWAYS acquire the original of any relevant document. So, though you strive to be accurate in your transcription, it is up to users to make sure that they agree with your transcription by consulting the original themselves.

Otherwise, though we strive to be exact and correct in our transcriptions, we are reading unfamiliar and often illegible handwriting with unfamiliar words, words spelled differently and creative punctuation and capitalization, and that means that transcribing can be inexact. That is okay.

Last, and not least, try and have some fun as you transcribe. It's a puzzle, hopefully solvable, normally not graded, and there is only the upsides already mentioned, as long as you try to transcribe what you see, and try to avoid interpreting what you are not sure of.

Happy transcribing! ⋈⊲⊳⋈

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