

Reading Old Documents

There will come a time when you are presented with a document that at first glance you are unable to read. A cross between Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Russian alphabet is staring straight back at you, expecting you to understand it.

Not only will you have to contend with some shocking handwriting from the enumerators of recent (19th century) censuses, but those old, faded documents that you will find in County Records Offices and Archives will also set out to confuse you. You may also have the odd piece of writing on a birth, marriage or death certificate that lays in wait to trap you!

Some of these are available to read on commercial websites, but even those transcribers can get it wrong! Always best to read the original document yourself wherever possible.

The following are some tips to help you overcome those problems.

1. Read the complete document first of all to see if you can get a feel for what it is all about.
2. Go back and re-read it, stopping at any words you cannot distinguish. Run your eyes over the rest of the text to see if the same word appears in a context where you do understand its meaning.
3. Search the document for any repeats of letters of which you are uncertain.
4. Be aware of common abbreviations plus symbols used to signify missing letters.
5. Practise. The more you try to read old handwriting, the easier it becomes.
6. Understand that until recently words were spelled as they sounded, with spelling only really settling down at the beginning of the 20th century.
7. Familiarise yourself with place names and names of people which might occur in the document. The letters in these names may help you to work out what another word is saying.
8. Transcribe as much of the document as you can then re-read, comparing the original with your transcript. The more you understand the document, the clearer the words will appear.
9. If you are visiting a Record Office or Archive, take a digital camera with you if at all possible. There might be a charge for using such, but then you will be able to examine the document at leisure.
10. Little and often is the key. Do not spend hours poring over the same document, but give your eyes a rest. It is amazing what fresh eyes can see!

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If you are having problems in reading a particular document, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of the document. If you have an electronic version of it – perhaps a photograph – you will be able to upload the bit that you cannot read for others to take a peek at and be able to offer translations!

If you would like to discover more about Reading Old Documents, listed below are some products that will certainly help you to understand, and all of them are available from [www.pariahchest.com](http://www.pariahchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- How to Decipher and Study Old Documents Ref: ANG-ARA 79
- Reading Old Handwriting Ref: NWA-OHM22
- Examples of Handwriting 1550-1650 Ref: SOG-1067xx
- Ancient Handwritings Ref: ANG-ARA290
- Court Hand Restored: The Student's Assistant in Reading Old Deeds, Charters & Records Ref: ARB-1022
- A Latin Glossary Ref: FHP-128