

# Reading Old Handwriting and Fonts

You don't need to be fluent to use documents written in a foreign language (Early American handwriting can be as tough as a foreign language)

The goal is be able to identify that a document is related to your family and has good stuff in it. You can always hire a researcher to catch all the nuances.

Paleography-study old ways of recording languages  
Transliteration-write in "foreign" language  
Translation-convert to another language

## >Helps to know history

### Handwriting Effected by

#### Pen

Quill pens introduced in the Middle Ages  
"Live" goose feathers most popular  
Shaped with pen knife Chisel vs Pointed cut  
Held a Limited amount of Ink - Need to Reink  
A hole in the nib increased speed  
Effected style of handwriting  
(rounded, line, blotches)  
1830 modern steel nib introduced  
(1830 and earlier census done with quill pens)

#### Ink

Early inks homemade (iron filings)  
Search for non-corrosive inks

#### Paper

Pre-1750 paper in America was imported

#### Writer

Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century "gentleman" didn't write

### Calendar

Dates are a great starting point  
Brief History of Calendar  
Julian Calendar  
Gregorian Calendar  
Created 1582 (adopted 1752 in America)  
January 1<sup>st</sup> replaced March 25<sup>th</sup> as 1<sup>st</sup> day  
Double-dating  
Months have several names  
7ber 8ber 9ber 10ber (Xber, Xbris) trap  
French Calendar

## >Gothic print (Fraktur)

Can be transliterated 100%

Usage stopped in 1940's

Newspaper Articles

Look at similarly shaped characters

Identify "differences"

**AU** AU

**BVP** BVP

**CEGS** CEGS

**DOQ** DOQ

**JJF** JJF it is an I if followed by a consonant,  
a J if followed by a vowel, a F if it has the flourish

**KRN** KRN

**MW** MW

**HLT** HLT *watch out for the T*

**XYZ** XYZ

**ao** ao

**bdv** bdv

**cerx** cerx

**gpq** gpq

**f** fs (s looks like an f without the bar)

**ijklt** ijklt

**nuhy** nuhy

**mw** mw

## >Handwriting

### Problems

Individual handwriting styles  
"Correct spelling" did not exist  
Interchangeable letters  
Surnames different spellings / styles  
in the same document

## Basic Approach

- 1) Quick overview
  - Type of document (birth,will,etc)
  - Language used in document  
Germany-German, Latin, French
  - Are there easy / hard parts
- 2) Gather your tools
  - Magnifying glass & Lighting
  - Lighting
  - Digital copy - Scanners / Digital Cameras  
Magnify  
Negative
  - Cheat-sheets
  - Keywords in the handwriting style  
Surnames, places, dates, "a & the"
  - Dictionaries  
Languages (Latin), Legal  
Reverse Alphabetical dictionary MINERT  
Read the dictionary to get used to  
to the language / letter combinations
  - Gazetteer, Maps
  - Yellow or buff paper for microfilm readers
  - Special Tools
- 3) Identify the easy stuff
  - Don't try to eat the elephant in one bite
  - Well-known abbreviations
  - Language Specific-German Nouns capitalized
  - Names underlined in "Latin"
  - Identify what you know
- 4) Make an alphabet of writer's style
- 5) Use Common Sense
  - Don't be looking for zebras in a herd of horses
  - Documents have standard phrases
  - Dates-person can't be born before married, 8's
- 6) Letter Distributions
  - Frequency of Letter Combinations
  - most common 1<sup>st</sup> letters of words SABUG
  - common following letters  
Q-u; A-nur; B-ea; C-hj; D-ei; E-rni; F-eat;  
G-es; H-eat; K-eot; L-eail; M-eami; N-dg;  
O-rnls; P-erfa; R-eat; S-tce; T-ej; U-ns;  
V-eo; W-eai; X-itep; Y-spmn; Z-eui
- 7) Know Symbols
- 8) Be flexible with spellings
  - Interchangeable Letters  
p - b ; c k ; t d dt ; v w f ; t th ; y i j
  - Words spelled phonetically  
Names -Batdorf, Battorf, Pottdorf,Pottorf
- 9) Ask for help

## Classifiers <--example of substitute letters

- Ascenders, Descenders , Both, Neither
- Loops
- Points

ɑ ɔ ũ AOU

ℒ ℒ ℒ BCL

f f (f) j j ʒ FHH IJT

q q GQ

ℓ ℓ KR

σ σ σ σ S St N M

u u ao

ɖ ɖ i ɖ dcis

n n n ñ emnu

(line over m or n = doubled letter)

f f f fhs

g j g p gjqp

Zimmermann Zimmermann

sch sch

- ◆ [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)  
Search -> Research Helps --> Sorted by Subject  
Word lists, Handwriting guides, Countries
- ◆ [www.cyndislist.com/handwrit.htm](http://www.cyndislist.com/handwrit.htm)
- ◆ [http://ce.byu.edu/is/site/special\\_offers/freecourses.dhtm](http://ce.byu.edu/is/site/special_offers/freecourses.dhtm)
- ◆ [www.german-usa.com/fonts/](http://www.german-usa.com/fonts/)
- ◆ [www.amberskyline.com/treasuremaps/oldhand.html](http://www.amberskyline.com/treasuremaps/oldhand.html)
- ◆ [www.peter-doerling.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm](http://www.peter-doerling.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm)

"**Deciphering Gothic Records**" by Fay S. Dearden (small flip-pamphlet on Germanic handwriting, abbreviations, symbols, examples)

"**If I can You Can Decipher Germanic Records**" by Edna M. Bentz Numerous examples of word written in script

"**Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents**" by Roger P. Minert, GRT Publications (He will be at the German Interest Group's annual seminar in July 2004)

"**Spelling Variations in German Names...**" by Roger P. Minert, GRT Publications

"**Reading Early American Handwriting**" Kip Sperry 2001  
VHS [www.123genealogy.com](http://www.123genealogy.com)

"**Understanding Colonial Handwriting**" by Harriet Stryker-Rodda 2002

[www.magnabrite.com](http://www.magnabrite.com) Magnifier (brings in light, you just set it on the paper-don't have to hold)