

Palaeography Help

Reading Handwritten Documents

Palaeography is the art of reading and analyzing historic handwriting and manuscripts.

Remember:

- Skills are gained through experience and practice
- Do background reading in the subject area
- Writing varies by place, time, and individual

Ask the Questions:

- Who created this document?
- Where and when was it created?
- Why was it created?
- What materials were used in its creation?

Consider:

- Variation from modern use of punctuation
- Phonetic and archaic spellings (remember, not everyone was fully literate and many spellings were not standardized)
- Upper case letters could be used for nouns
- Abbreviations appear as superscripts, symbols, marks, and letters left out
- Changes in the way numerals are represented
- Variety of surfaces and writing utensils

Tips:

1. Try to identify words first, then attempt to understand content
2. Start transcribing by writing down the words you know and leaving blanks
3. Put guesses in brackets
4. Match known letters/words to unknown letters/words
5. Write out an alphabet of how letters are formed in the document
6. Go letter by letter if needed
7. Look up unfamiliar words
8. Count writing strokes (minims)
9. Use a magnifying glass to follow writing strokes
10. Read and reread to get syntax
11. Use internal evidence (dates, places, events)
12. Research people, places, etc. in secondary sources
13. Cross reference with another document
14. Look up individuals, events, etc. in other contemporary documents
15. Read aloud if you need to!
16. Leave document and return to it later
17. As you develop confidence, go with your “gut”
18. Ask someone else to look at it with fresh eyes

Introduction to Palaeography

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