



copies of them to serve legal needs. For example, probate records often contain multiple copies: the original files as well as copies of some of the records in those files that were transcribed into docket books. Diaries, however, are very personal items. There are no requirements. Each creator can write whatever they like within them.

## 2. *Know the Language*

Early records in England were written in Latin. English was mandated during the Commonwealth era, but Latin returned with the Crown. It was not until the eighteenth century that English was adopted for official records. In America most records were written in English. The Latin used in this time period was not the Classical Latin of ancient Rome. The Early Modern Latin of the Church and Court had continued to develop over time, adding many new words from other languages.

### *Dates*

Documents can have dates written in a number of different ways, even within the same document. Sometimes dates will be written out in words (called “long dates”). Dates can also be written in Regnal years (the year of the current monarch’s reign). American documents do not use regnal years after the American Revolution.

Roman numerals are commonly used in dates. Quarter Days, Cross-Quarter Days, and Saint’s Days (such as Candlemas, Lady Day, Michaelmas, etc.) are commonly referenced in dates.

## 3. *Reading the Handwriting*

Writing was not taught as part of a school curriculum until the nineteenth century. Writing Masters were hired to teach everyone from clerks to budding gentlemen and ladies. Copybooks were created for students to trace and learn how to form letters. In Britain, scribes did much of the writing for people. Literacy was much higher in British North America than in Britain itself, however, and more people wrote for themselves, although scribes were also commonly used. Researchers will encounter numerous types of hands, including Court, Italic, Secretary, and Round.

## 4. *Deciphering Creative Spelling*

Standardized spelling is a modern invention, so be prepared for variations. But even in modern times, there may be no such thing as a single way to spell words. There may be times when you need to think phonetically, as words were spelled that way. Some letters, such as *i* and *j* or *u* and *v*, were used interchangeably. A double lowercase *f* may be used as an uppercase *F*. Modern rules of punctuation were in no way followed.

Capitalization was used as desired to emphasize any word and can appear anywhere in a line. Contractions are very common to save both time and space. The Old English letter Þ (thorn) sounded like the letters *th*. It came to be represented as the letter *ȝ*. Therefore, when you see the word *ȝe*, it should be pronounced (and written in modern spelling) as *the*.

### 5. Recognizing the Meaning of Marks and Abbreviations

- A straight line over a vowel indicates that the letter *n* or *m* which would immediately follow the vowel has been omitted.
- A straight line over the letter *m* in the middle of a word indicates the letter *n* has been omitted as the next letter.
- A crooked line over some letter or a straight line through a letter indicates the omission of one or more letters following.
- A superscript letter indicates that one or more letters preceding or following were omitted.

### Transcribing

The best way to learn how to read documents is to transcribe them. Follow the rules of transcription:

- Transcribe one line at a time.
- Transcribe what you see.
- Insert an underscore for every letter you cannot read.
- Put uncertain information in square brackets with a question mark.
- Text inserted between lines or in margins should be indicated between carats ^word^ to indicate such insertion.

When reading through the document, first go through and read and transcribe all of the boilerplate text. This will allow you to get familiar with the handwriting of this particular scribe. Then start reading the other words. Do not try to jump right to looking for names. If you do so, you can miss vital information, including other names.

### Bibliography

Many of the older books in this bibliography are available as reprints, or in their original form online at the Internet Archive, or on subscription databases such as America's Historical Imprints, Early English Books Online, and Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

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