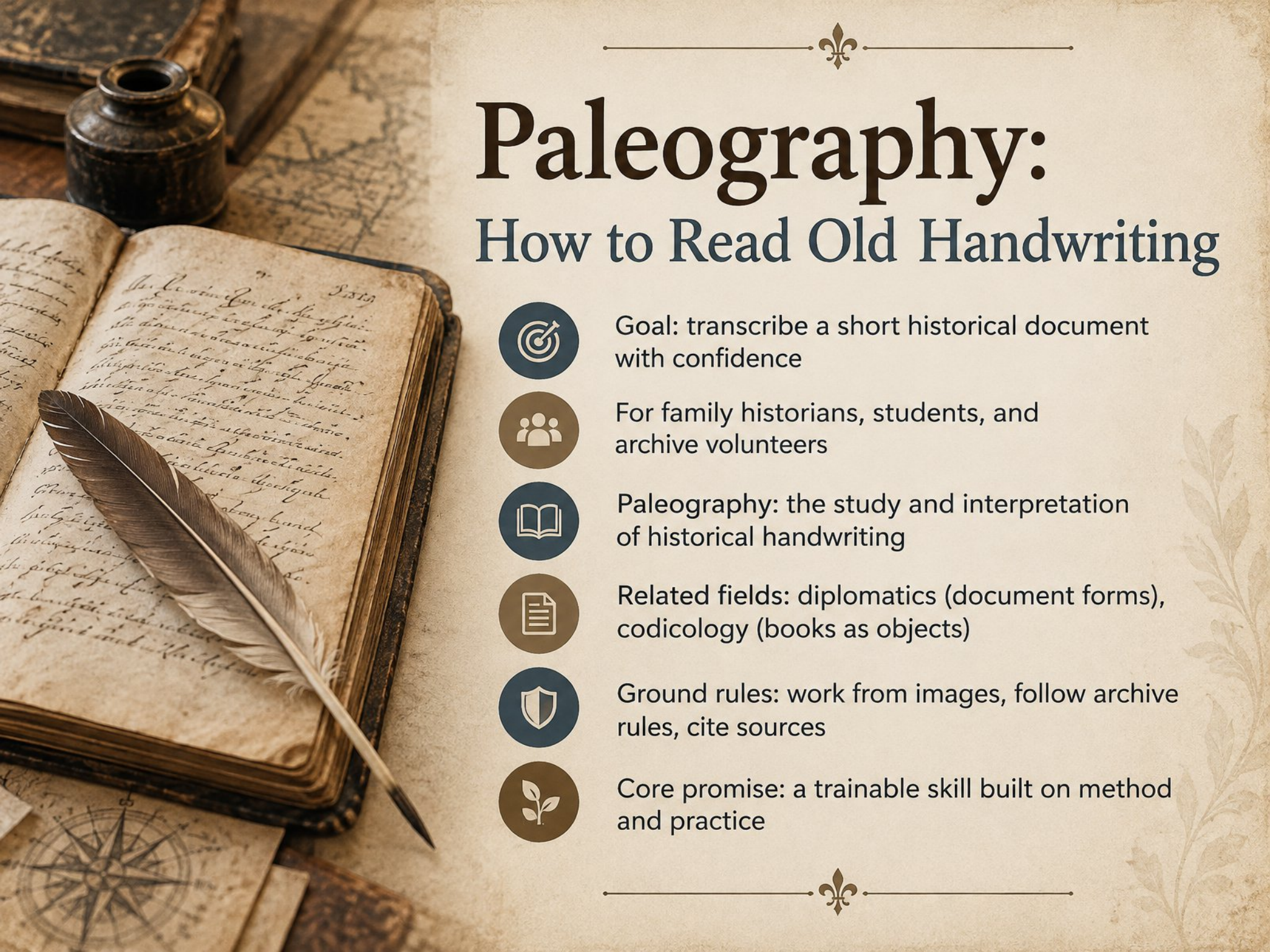




Paleography:

How to Read Old Handwriting



Goal: transcribe a short historical document with confidence



For family historians, students, and archive volunteers



Paleography: the study and interpretation of historical handwriting



Related fields: diplomatics (document forms), codicology (books as objects)



Ground rules: work from images, follow archive rules, cite sources

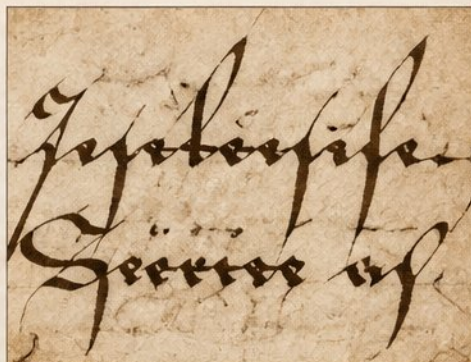


Core promise: a trainable skill built on method and practice

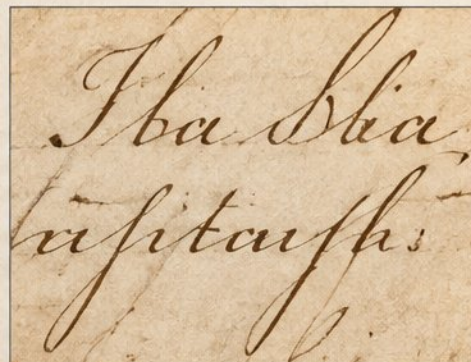
Why Handwriting Changed: Scripts, Materials, and Tools



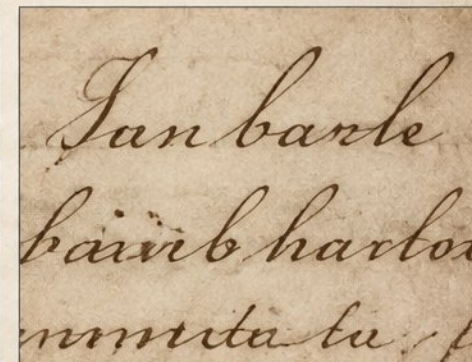
Court



Secretary



Italic



Round hand

- ✦ Four main hands, 1500–1800: court, secretary, italic, and round hand
- ✦ Secretary dominates early modern manuscripts; italic was the 18th-century common hand
- ✦ Mixed hands blended secretary and italic, developing into modern round hand
- ✦ Writing tools and materials shaped letterforms and script style
- ✦ Continental traditions produced Kurrent and neo-Gothic scripts
- ✦ Abbreviations form a system: suspensions, contractions, and brevigraphs





The Paleographer's Toolkit: Deciphering Letter by Letter

- Core method: isolate letters, compare known forms, build an alphabet chart
- Trust internal consistency within a single scribe's hand
- Problem letters: minims (i, n, m, u, v, w), long s, thorn
- Two forms of a and e; secretary r with flourish or twin forms
- Capitals and initials act as anchors when lowercase forms are uncertain
- Spelling is not standardized: expect phonetic spelling and doubled letters
- i/j and u/v interchange freely; transcribe exactly what is on the page

Minims (i, n, m, u, v, w)

i n m u v w

Long s

f

Thorn

þ

Two forms of a

a a

Two forms of e

e e

Secretary r with flourish or twin forms

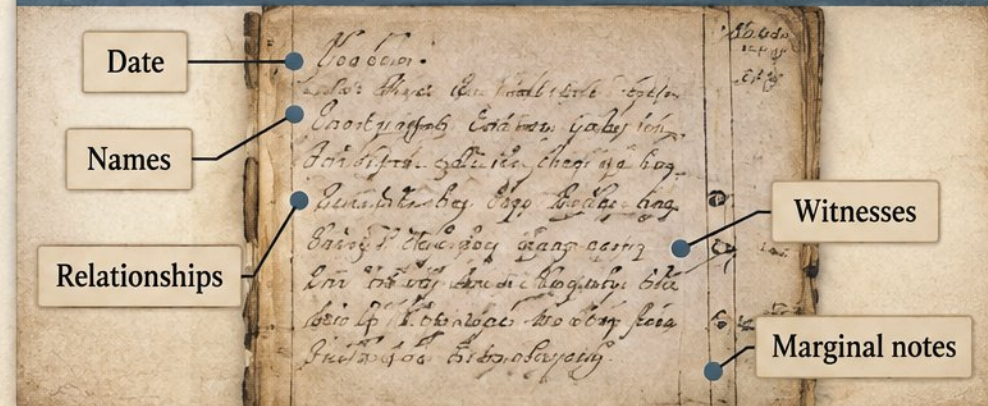
r r



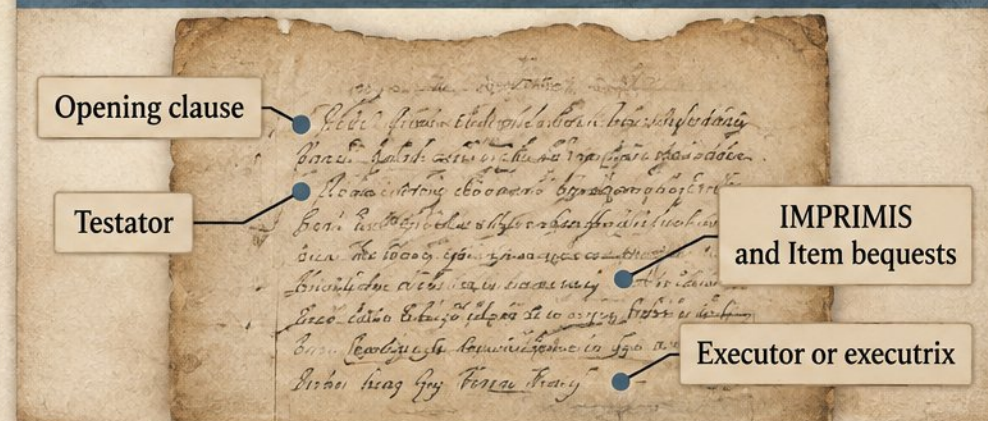
Reading the Document, Not Just the Words: Structure and Formula

- Old documents follow predictable formulas: learn the skeleton, then fill in specifics
- Parish register entries: date, names, relationships, witnesses, marginal notes
- Categories may run chronologically, or baptisms, marriages, and burials be divided
- Wills: opening clause, testator, IMPRIMIS and Item bequests, executor or executrix
- Deeds: parties, consideration, parcels, covenants, seals; indented top edge and chirographum
- Latin and law-Latin: formulas let you find name, date, and place fields
- Dates and money: regnal years, Old Style dating (year began March 25 before 1752), £ s d, Roman numerals

Parish Register Entry



Will



Reading the Page's Context: Names, Places, Dates, and Numbers

- Context beats letter-by-letter guessing: place and date predict likely names.
- Name variation is normal: Elizabeth appears as Elisabeth, Elsabeth, Elysabethe.
- Gazetteers resolve variant and lost place-names against modern authority names.
- Numbers: dates, ages, money, quantities, fractions, and old forms of zero.
- Marginalia, insertions, and cross-outs: trust with care and cross-check.



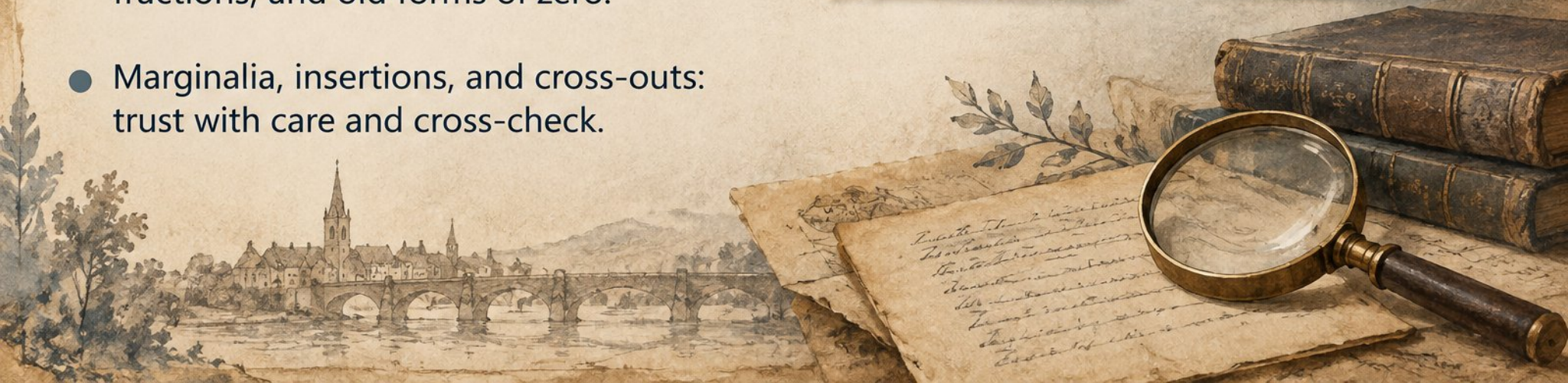
Historical Place-Name



Name Variants

Elizabeth
Elisabeth
Elsabeth
Elysabethe

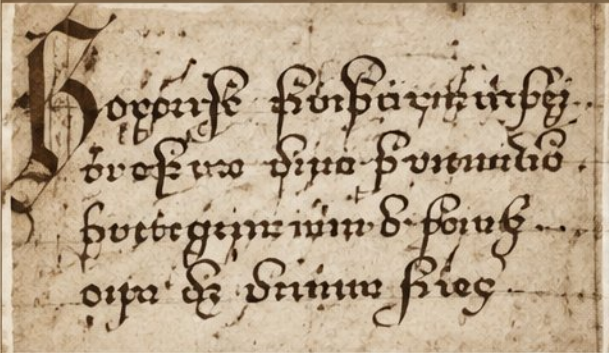
Modern Gazetteer Entry



Hands-On Practice: Transcribing Real Script Samples

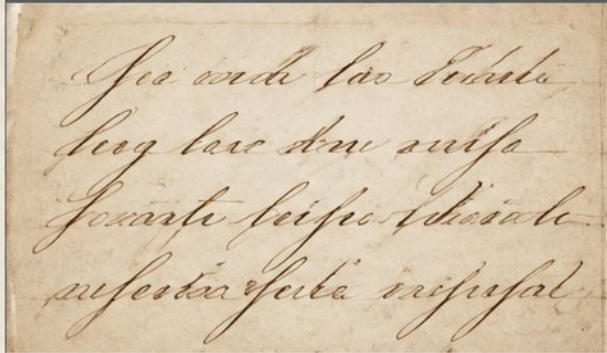


Tudor-era entry



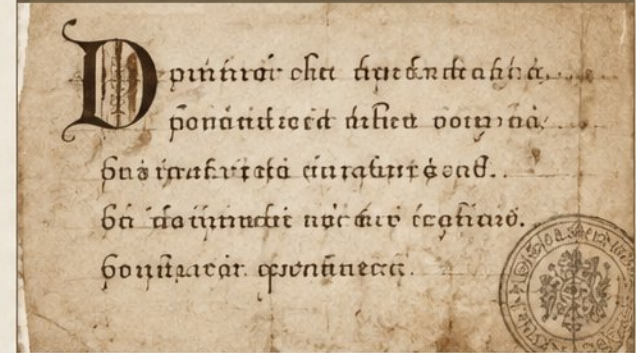
Transcription:

Nineteenth-century letter



Transcription:

Latin formulaic document



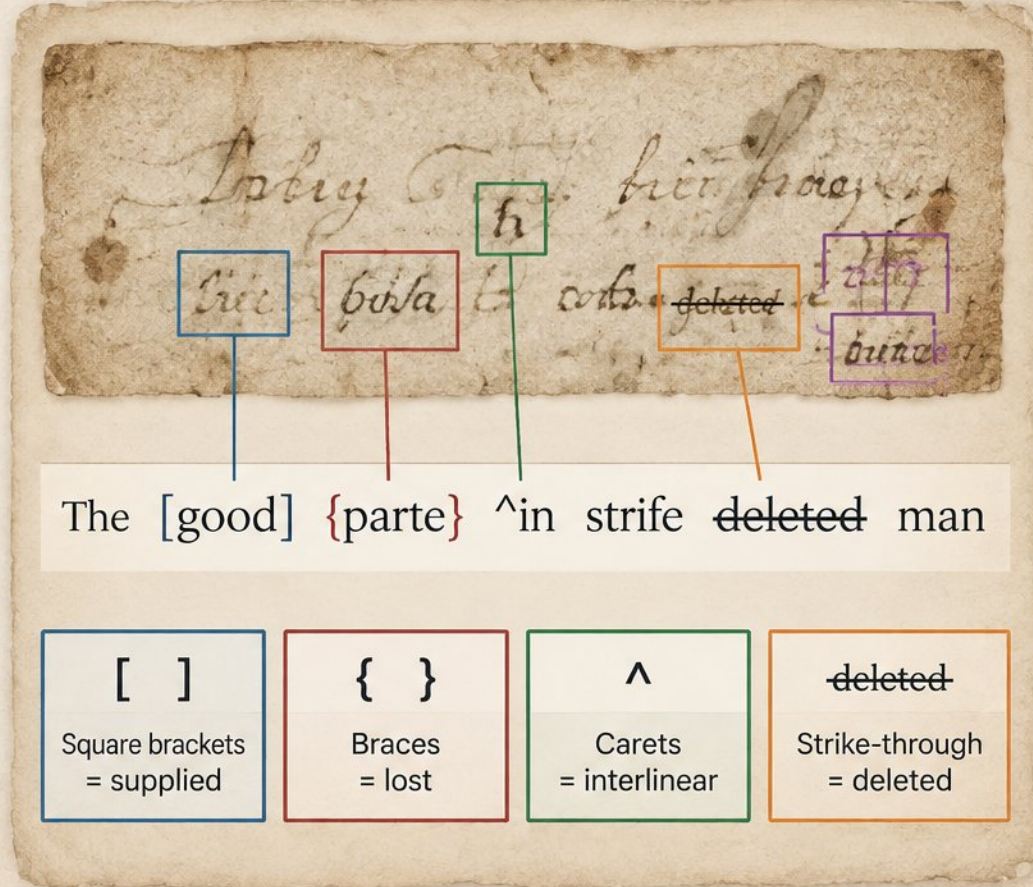
Transcription:

- Guided Tudor-era entry: isolate letters, compare forms, then contextualize
- A nineteenth-century flowing hand still hides historical spellings
- Latin formulaic document: locate only name, date, and place fields
- Watch for minims, superscript abbreviations, faded ink, modernization temptation
- Build your own letterform reference sheet from variant forms
- Compare with semi-diplomatic answers; expansions marked in brackets []



Transcripts That Stand Up: Conventions, Uncertainty, and Self-Checking

- Expectation bias: you see the word you expect, not the one written
- Semi-diplomatic practice: keep original spelling, capitals, lineation
- Expand abbreviations, lower superscripts, mark supplied letters
- Square brackets = supplied; braces = lost; carets = interlinear; strike-through = deleted
- Read twice, aloud, and names backwards; flag every uncertain reading



Digital Tools and AI Transcription: What They Can and Cannot Do



Enhancement aids: magnify, adjust contrast, flip, invert—never alter the original file



HTR engines (Transkribus, PyLaia, TrOCR) excel on Latin script, weaker elsewhere



2025–2026 accuracy: roughly 2–9% character error rates on Latin-script benchmarks



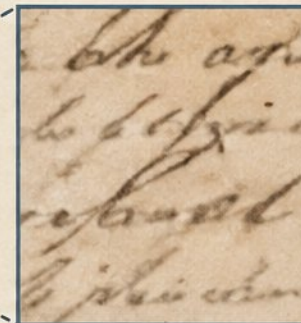
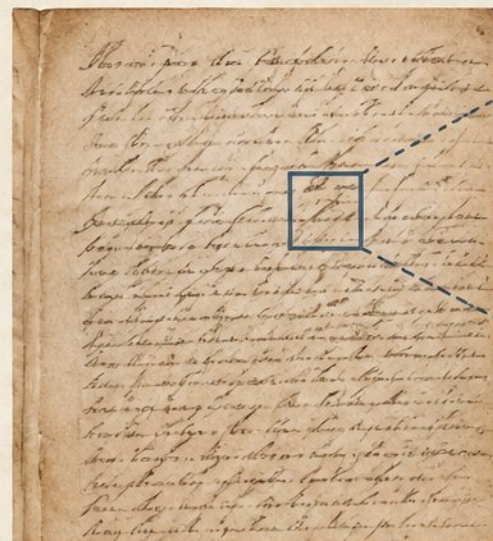
Multimodal LLMs transcribe 18th–19th century English at ~5.7–7% CER



But they hallucinate and sometimes refuse pages—treat output as first pass only

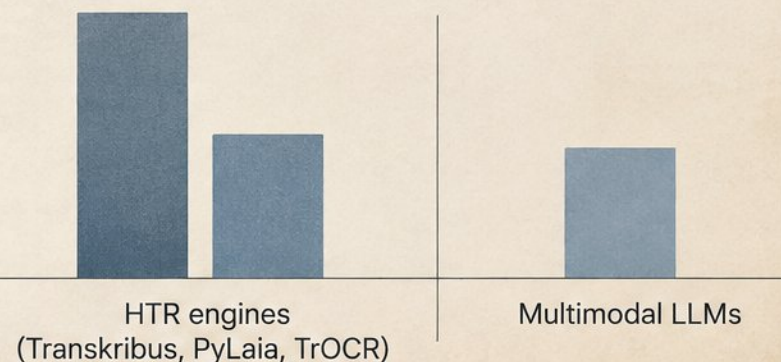


Tiered workflow: fast tools for bulk, human or premium review for hard pages



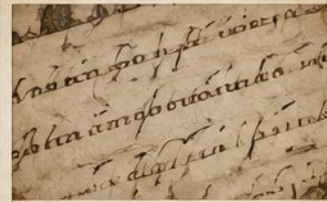
Character Error Rates (CER)

Lower is better



Archives, Practice Collections, and Community Transcription

- Find tutorials and transcription exercises at national and university archives
- English Handwriting 1500–1700, Ad fontes, MultiPal, and medieval palaeography albums
- Crowdsourced projects welcome beginners: By the People, Transcribe Bentham, Europeana Transcribe
- Smithsonian Transcription Center and Crowd Cymru offer feedback and review loops
- Build a personal reference library: alphabet charts, abbreviation lists, glossaries
- Volunteering builds skill, earns credits, and provides valuable references



English Handwriting
1500–1700



Ad fontes



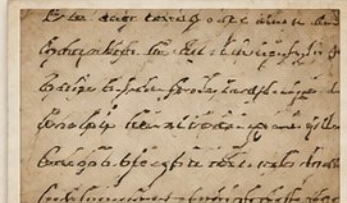
MultiPal



medieval
palaeography albums



By the People



Transcribe
Bentham



Europeana
Transcribe



Smithsonian
Transcription Center



Crowd Cymru



Special Cases: Latin, Law Hands, and Damaged Documents



Latin documents: learn the formula, find name fields without translating



Courthand: Chancery and Exchequer grew stylised, abolished 1733 for 'legible' hand



Probatum probate clauses and Anno Domini dating in wills and parish records



Damaged text: multi-light imaging, duplicate copies, bishop's transcripts



Mixed scripts: Latin phrases in English prose, italic proper nouns in secretary



When defeated: local record offices, county societies, peer review



Common Errors and How to Avoid Them

- ❖ **Signature errors:** minim confusion, wrong expansions, misread names, mistaken capitals
- ❖ **Expectation bias:** reading what should be there, not what is written
- ❖ **Rushing long documents:** short careful passes beat one exhausted reading
- ❖ **Never silently modernize or "fix"** the original wording
- ❖ **Self-check:** reread twice, read aloud, log every uncertain reading

Minim confusion

Misread:

uin



Correct:

min

Wrong expansion

Misread:

p̃



Correct:

per

Misread name

Misread:

John



Correct:

John



A closer look at letterforms helps prevent errors.

From Reading to Research: Using Transcriptions Responsibly



Record source reference, date, repository, and transcription conventions



Make transcriptions citable and shareable in your research notes



Mark confidence levels; flag uncertain names for follow-up



Preserve original spelling and wording; credit the archive



Cross-check against indexes, calendars, and published transcripts

Trif lumen a la luce an h

Certain

Trif caru la daria.

Trif lumen [Reservu]

Uncertain

Trif lumen la a fuma.

Trif lumen la lumen

Certain

Source Reference

Repository: _____

Date: _____

Reference: _____

Transcription Conventions: _____

Your Paleography Practice Plan: Next Steps



Short, regular weekly readings beat occasional long sessions



Master one document type and its formulas before branching out



Build a personal case file of letters, abbreviations, tricky words



Join a transcription community for feedback and motivation



Recap the method: isolate, compare, contextualize, verify



Course Wrap-Up: Key Takeaways and Resources



Reading old handwriting is a trainable skill, built on method and practice



Match your approach to the document's script, formulas, and regional conventions



Use context—names, places, dates, document type—to predict and verify readings



Transcribe faithfully, mark uncertainty honestly, never silently modernize the original



AI can speed up your work, but human verification stays essential



Keep learning: practice collections, crowdsourced projects, and community feedback



PersonWise.

PersonWise • AI digital-human course platform



Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

personwise.ai/t/86ed0e5f/public