

# Strengthen Your Analysis: Transcribing and Abstracting\*

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## I. Introduction

Genealogical proof requires the conduct of reasonably exhaustive research, “emphasizing original records.”<sup>1</sup> Typically, information in pre-twentieth century documents was written by hand, using letter forms and spelling practices that differ from conventions in use today. The first step in accurately interpreting a handwritten record is the creation of a transcription—an exact copy. An abstract is created by judiciously editing a transcription to produce an abbreviated version of the underlying document. The ability to craft transcriptions and abstracts are essential skills for genealogists.

*Genealogy Standards* provides guidance for transcribing and abstracting in Standards 29 and 30, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Other generally applicable standards also apply, such as Standard 5 (Citation Elements), Standard 23 (Reading handwriting), Standard 24 (Understanding meanings), Standard 25 (Note-taking content), and Standard 26 (Distinction between content and comments).<sup>3</sup> Additional guidance is found in rubrics developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists® (BCG).<sup>4</sup>

## II. Why Transcribe?

Before we can determine whether a document is relevant to a research question, we need to be able to read it in its entirety—and that may require a transcription that can be read more easily than the original. You could overlook important information if you just zero in on a name of interest without transcribing every word. A transcription is also useful for sharing with others who may lack the time or expertise to decipher the original document. Finally, a transcription informs future researchers of how the transcriber interpreted a word or phrase.

## III. Challenges Presented by Pre-Twentieth Century Records

**Archaic Writing.** Letter forms that were different from those in use today were in common use well into the 1800s; English Round Hand” (similar to modern cursive writing) did not come into consistent use until about the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

**Idiosyncrasies of Scribes.** Writers sometimes employed non-standard conventions, such as using capital letters indiscriminately or failing to cross a t or dot an i. Careful reading of a document will aid in

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\* All websites cited herein were last viewed 25 October 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition, (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2019), 1

<sup>2</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 29–30.

<sup>3</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 5 and 23–26.

<sup>4</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, “Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification,” (<https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/BCG-New-Application-Rubrics-2019.pdf>).

<sup>5</sup> Kip Sperry, *Reading Early American Handwriting* (1998; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2008), 3–4.

identifying and deciphering a scribe's idiosyncrasies. Scribes may have used abbreviations personal to him or her. Given names were shortened with or without the use of superscripted letters, and there was not necessarily a pattern to how this was done. For example, Jno. or Jn<sup>o</sup> could refer to John or Jonathan. In other cases scribes used contractions of their own making.

***Numerals and Calendars.*** In addition to numerals that may have been written differently, transcribers must keep in mind that England and its colonies did not adopt the modern Gregorian calendar until September 1752. Because the first day of the old Julian calendar began on 25 March (not 1 January), scribes double dated pre-1752 dates between 1 January and March 24.<sup>6</sup> For example, 27 February 1690/91 would be considered 1690 following the old style calendar and 1691 under the modern calendar.

***Dated or Phonetic Spelling.*** Records created before the early 1900s are characterized by a lack of standardized spelling and the use of phonetic spelling.<sup>7</sup>

***Unfamiliar Legal or other Jargon.*** Legal documents usually contain boilerplate or stock phrases. The transcriber's knowledge of the terms that are typically included in documents such as wills or deeds can help to interpret words that may be difficult to read. *Black's Law Dictionary* is the leading authority on legal terms and abbreviations in pre-twentieth century documents created in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The fourth edition was the last to include archaic legal terms.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. Genealogy Standards for Transcribing and Abstracting

Your primary point of reference for deciphering the writing in a document is the document itself. Thus, it is important to pay attention to how the particular scribe formed and connected letters. Standard 32 sets forth the following requirements applicable to both transcribing and abstracting:

- Documentation by citing the source;
- Accuracy in the exact rendering of features such as wording, spelling, and numbering;
- Appropriate recording of obsolete letter forms with either modern equivalents or the original letter forms; and
- The addition of short insertions between square brackets or longer commentary that is clearly marked as separate text, footnotes, or endnotes.<sup>10</sup>

Other generally applicable standards also come into play when creating a transcription or abstract:

- Standards 1–6 explain the uses, purposes, elements, and format of citations;
- Standard 23 contemplates that genealogists will “correctly read all legible handwriting” in a source;
- Standard 24 recommends that a genealogist understand “the meaning for the source’s time and place; and
- Standard 26 tells us that transcribed or abstracted source content should be distinguished from the

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<sup>6</sup> FamilySearch Research Wiki (<https://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/>), “England Calendar Changes,” rev. 25 Dec 2015. Also, Judy G. Russell, “Dating history,” *The Legal Genealogist*, Feb 18, 2020 (<https://www.legalgenealogist.com/author/judy-g-russell/>).

<sup>7</sup> Val. D. Greenwood, “Language, Terminology, and Important Issues,” *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy*, 4th edition (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2017), 29–56, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Campbell Black, *Black’s Law Dictionary: Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*, revised fourth edition (St. Paul Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Judy G. Russell, “Which Black’s?” (<https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2015/03/24/which-blacks/>).

<sup>10</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 32.

transcriber's personal "comments, descriptions, interpretations, paraphrases, and summaries."<sup>11</sup>

**Transcriptions.** Begin by documenting the source of a transcription with a citation that clearly communicates the source quality and where the information came from. Standard 5 describes four aspects of a citation:

- Who (creator or informant)?
- What (Title or name)?
- When created?
- Where: How to locate (which varies depending on whether the item is unpublished, published, or online)?<sup>12</sup>

Standard 29 requires the inclusion of the entire item, "including any headings, insertions, notations, endorsements or the like—whether on the item's front or back or on an attachment."<sup>13</sup> The BCG rubric regarding accuracy adds that "[n]early every word and idiosyncrasy (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, signatures, or marks) should be precisely rendered."<sup>14</sup>

The formatting of a transcript is not always relevant.<sup>15</sup> Standard 29 contemplates the use of annotations between square brackets, footnotes, or separate text to show where a source is "damaged or illegible, omits expected information, or provides unexpected information."<sup>16</sup> Annotations are also useful when the transcriber is uncertain about a word or a clarification is in order. You can include these kind of notes in square brackets, or in footnotes, or in separate text (such as an introduction to the transcription). Use the Latin "*sic*" to indicate that a word is transcribed exactly as it is in the original—complete with any error—but refrain from overusing it.

**Abstracts.** Abstracts should adhere to the standards for transcriptions, with the focus on eliminating redundant or formulaic language while preserving all "significant information from all parts of the document."<sup>17</sup> Do not change the order in which information is given, but do "smooth out the remaining text."<sup>18</sup> The rubrics suggest that any ambiguous words and phrases be quoted.<sup>19</sup> Standard 30 adds: Quotation marks or indented formatting is used "to identify any phrases of three or more words appearing in the original"; and names or dates should not be modernized."<sup>20</sup>

## V. Opportunities to Hone Your Skills Through Volunteerism

The skill of transcribing can be honed by working with a variety of documents that are commonly encountered by genealogical researchers. Repositories may require registration and the use of their own conventions for transcribing documents in their holdings. Following is a list of selected crowd-sourced transcription projects:

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<sup>11</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 1–6 and 23–26.

<sup>12</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 5, 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 29. Also, Board for Certification of Genealogists, Rubrics. "DW2. Completeness of transcription."

<sup>14</sup> BCG Rubrics "DW1. Accuracy of transcription."

<sup>15</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 30. Also, BCG Rubrics "DW4. Completeness of abstract."

<sup>18</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 30.

<sup>19</sup> BCG Rubrics "DW3. "Accuracy of abstract."

<sup>20</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 30.

- Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/smithsonian-transcription-center>).
- Boston Public Library (Boston Public Library, *Anti-Slavery Manuscripts*, <https://www.antislaverymanuscripts.org>).
- Library of Virginia (*Making History Transcribe*, Library Of Virginia; [http://www.virginiamemory.com/?\\_ga=2.228320085.990735739.1550567557-1877430469.1546729812](http://www.virginiamemory.com/?_ga=2.228320085.990735739.1550567557-1877430469.1546729812)).
- Library of Congress (<https://crowd.loc.gov>).

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