

15 Techniques to Triumph Over Poor Penmanship

John M. Hoenig describes some techniques for reading old handwriting.

HOW OFTEN have we trembled at finding an important document only to have our spirits plummet when we can't read crucial information? How many of us wish we could find and afford the services of an expert in penmanship?

This article describes ways to decipher handwriting. To get prepared, it is essential to note what kinds of handwriting you are facing. Are you looking at passenger manifests (which were filled out where the ship departed, not at Ellis Island where the ship may have arrived)? Are you looking at American census records? From what period of time are the records? And in what language are they?

The first thing to do is to get samples of the handwriting used at that time and place if possible; if not, from a place and time in close proximity. The old German handwriting, known as *fraktur*, is practically impossible to read unless you have a "key".

Fortunately, a quick search of the Internet will give you samples. When I started reading Polish records I looked at a dictionary and learned that there are several additional letters in the Polish alphabet. That, however, did not prepare me for identifying handwritten versions of the letters. I got nowhere fast until I learned to read the Polish letters. American

handwriting has changed greatly over the years. Check references like Ancestry's *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Chapter 5) and *Unpuzzling Your Past* (Betterway Books), and search the online articles at Ancestry's website www.ancestry.com for tips on reading American handwriting. You'll find, for example, that the sequence of letters "ss" appears in old American handwriting as "fs".

In this article, we illustrate techniques for deciphering penmanship using European handwriting examples but the princi-

Groom's Full Name:	A. Moses Peller
Residence:	234 Blicker st
Age:	25 Jahr
Color:	Blek
Single or Widowed:	Singel
Birthplace:	Jablina Galizje

This 1904 New York marriage certificate for the author's cousin A. Moses Peller was obviously filled out by a European American.

Note that Moses' age was "25 Jahr", his color (presumably hair color) was "Blek", and his marital status was "Singel".

ples are applicable to all kinds of writing. Readers are likely to encounter European handwriting in passenger manifests, emigration lists and on American birth, mar-

riage and death certificates. For example, the person filling out the marriage certificate for my Peller cousins obviously came from Europe.

Techniques for Deciphering a Handwritten Passage

1. Study all of the handwriting on the page (or even the surrounding pages) to get used to the style.

2. Try to look for several examples of every letter of the alphabet (you'll need to do this separately for upper case and lower case letters). You may need to look also for particular combinations of letters; for example, how are letters written if they follow an "o", "v" or "w" (these are letters that end with the pen high on the line). You may want to paste samples of each letter into a "scrapbook" for reference.

3. Study the sequence of pen strokes used to write each letter and practice writing the letters in the period handwriting. When you compare a mystery letter to your samples you can try to match pen strokes — look for particular elements of the letter

and don't be concerned if they have been minimized or exaggerated. I developed this common-sense approach only to find that the tactic had been formalized and evaluated by psychologists (see Jennifer J. Freyd, "Representing the dynamics of a static form", *Memory and Cognition* 1983, 11(4): 342-346 for a study specific to handwriting analysis). Be aware that one writer may use two different forms of a letter. I transcribed a list prepared in 1939 of dues payers to a community organization in Kolomyja

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(Poland). After struggling with the list for a few hours I realized that the recorder used two separate forms of the letter “i” and also two forms of the letter “r”.

4. For the letters “i” and “j”, check whether the writer always, usually or never writes the dot and, if the dot appears regularly, note where it occurs and what is its shape. This will help you decide whether a dot is part of a letter or whether it’s just a speck of dirt.

5. Try to envision the ways in which letters can become misshapen. Here are some possibilities:

i. the pen is not lifted when it should be; for example, when going to make the cross-bar in a “t” or an “A”, thus resulting in an additional line;

ii. the ink does not flow properly out of the pen resulting either in a gap or in double strokes if the writer goes back to darken a weak line;

iii. the writer changes his or her mind in the middle of a word and makes a correction; for example, the writer realizes he’s misspelling a word and changes a letter that’s already been fully or partially formed;

iv. two words get run together; for example I misread Leonard F. Peller by thinking the “F” was

attached to the “d” in Leonard. If you’re aware of these possibilities you’re more likely to spot them.

6. Try to find the unidentified word or name elsewhere on the page.

7. Keep track of problem letters. For example, I’ve learned that I have a miserable time distinguishing between a cursive European “u” and an “n”. Thus, whenever I see a “u” I also consider whether it could be an “n”; I also consider whether “un” could be “nu”, “nn”, “im” or “mi”. (It helps to count the number of peaks and then list all the possible combinations of letters: see box). As another example, I looked for Fitzers in the Ellis Island database and found some from “Ladagora”, but I simply could not find “Ladagora” on any map or in any gazetteer. When I looked at the actual passenger manifest, I realized the person doing the index had misread Sadagora (a town in Bukovina, Romania). The text box lists problem letters. Add to the list based on your experience.

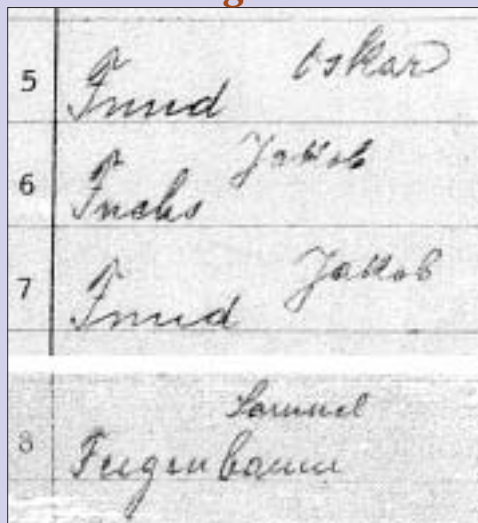
8. Try to identify common sequences of letters, and sequences of letters that (almost) never occur. For example, in Polish it makes perfect sense to have the sequence “prz”, as in

przemsyl (Polish for industry). Until I learned this, I had a hard time believing I was reading the word correctly. Keep the appropriate dictionary handy to test if what you think you’re seeing makes sense.

9. If you’re trying to read names, it helps to be familiar with names from the region. Before reading Polish names in vital records, try looking at a Polish business directory, several of which are on the Internet. To identify town names, it helps to study maps and gazetteers to familiarize yourself with the possibilities. If you’re reading professions in American census forms, be aware that there are many professions that no longer (or hardly) exist, such as “baster” and “operator” (in a dress shop) and “blocker” in a millinery. So, take the time to read a few pages of census forms. If you’re reading a foreign language, make a list of professions common during that time period and look them up in the dictionary (or find a translation guide on the Internet). Does the mystery profession in your document look similar to anything on your list? I tried to identify a Brooklyn street address in a passenger manifest I found at the Ellis Island website. I have a current map of Brooklyn for reference, but I worried about

The letters “u” and “n” look very similar when written cursively in a European handwriting. To make matters worse, the letter “m” can be confused with the sequence “ni” or “in” or, for that matter, with “ui” or “iu”. Consider the names on lines 5 and 7 of the figure (these names were taken from a 1930s list of dues payers to a community organization in Kolomyja, Poland; the microfilmed list is in the possession of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC). The first letter is an “F” and the last letter is a “d”. What’s in between? It helps to list the possibilities. There are four peaks. Thus, we might have: Fnnd, Fuud, Fund, Fnud, Fimd or Fmid.

Counting the Peaks



With the additional information detailing from where the document came, we can see that the only possibility that makes sense is the name Fund — Oskar and Jakob.

Consider the name on line 8 of the figure. The first part of the name is Feigenba. What’s at the end? There are five peaks. Listing out all the possibilities leads us to “um”, i.e., the name is Feigenbaum. The name above Feigenbaum has five peaks in the middle — a little thought leads us to the name Samuel. For completeness, we note the name on line 6 is Jakob Fuchs (do not confuse the “J” with a “Y”).

Problem Letters in European Handwriting

The following samples were taken from a 1930s Polish list of dues payers. Compare these samples with the writing of a Polish-Austrian immigrant below.

First line. The letters “I” and “J” can look very similar but the lower loop of the “J” usually extends below the baseline while the entire letter “I” is above

Iw Iw Ju Ju Fr Fr Fr Th Ta

lin La La Sch Sch Sa Sak Zie Zei

Ga Ger Ma Ma Mu Uh Ur

the baseline. The “J” often appears to have a crossbar. “F” and “T” look the same except for “F” having a crossbar that is missing in the “T”.

Second line. The letters “L”, “S” and “Z” are similar. The bottom right part of the “L” dips low where-

as the bottom of the “S” rises steadily. “Z” is distinguished by the presence of a crossbar.

Third line. To a North American, the letter “G” can look like “Aj” or “Oj”; the letter “M” looks like the letter “h”. “U” can be confused with “N”.

The figure above has the names Stein, Silber, Scherl, Sandbrand, Schorr. Some letters occur in two distinct forms. Compare the “i” in Stein with the “i” in Silber; also compare the “r”s in Silber and Scherl with those in Sandbrand and Schorr, and note that the form of “i” used in Silber can be confused with an “r”. The “e”s in Stein, Silber and Scherl can be confused with an “i” like the one in Stein. The “e” is wider at the top than is the “i”. The letter “c”, as in Scherl, may look like an “e”. In some cases, one has to use the context (surrounding letters) to determine what makes sense.

the street name having changed over the years. On the Internet I found a website with obsolete Brooklyn street names. If you're not lucky enough to find such as list on the Internet, you may have to look at old city directories — many of these have a list of the streets in the town.

10. Try to get someone from the region of interest — and who knows the language — to read the document. Can you find a church or social club whose members have a historical tie to the area of interest? In general, older people are more familiar with older styles of penmanship than are younger people.

11. Try waiting a week or two and taking a fresh look at the entire passage. Sometimes the problematic name or word will just jump out at you.

12. Try posting an image of the handwriting on a bulletin board.

Someone may find your impossible dilemma has an obvious interpretation.

13. Investigate if there is another copy of the document. Census forms were often filled out in duplicate, as were some vital records, with one copy going to the state capital and another being retained locally (usually in a county office). Maybe the other copy is more legible.

14. Investigate duplicate sources of the information. For example, for arrivals at Ellis Island, you can look at the original passenger manifest, or the index prepared by the Ellis Island Foundation, or the soundex index in the National Archives (also available from your local Family History Center). Also, from 1908 to 1937, New York City kept two separate and independent sets of marriage records. One was maintained by the Department of Health and the other by the County Clerk's Offices. (Both are now at the New

York City Municipal Archives.) So, check both.

15. See if you can work the problem backwards. Suppose there's a passenger arrival record for a Sxxxx Peller from the town of xxxx where the xxxx's are seemingly illegible. Suppose further that Mr. Peller is 22 and a tinsmith. If you check naturalization, marriage or other records and find a Simon Peller, tinsmith, of the appropriate age, and from the town of Jablonow, you can go back to the passenger manifest and see if the unreadable name and town could possibly be Simon and Jablonow. (If you find that the town matches up but the first name looks more like Schaija(?) than Simon, do not be too surprised or discouraged — you might still have a match; Schaija (or whatever his name was) may simply have Americanized his name after arriving. Keep researching!)