

CHAPTER FIVE

FRENCH HANDWRITING AND SPELLING

This chapter provides basic information, examples and guidelines for developing the ability to read French handwriting. Your success as an extractor will depend greatly upon adjusting to each new style of handwriting.

Introduction

The Pelasgic Script from ancient Greece was the first alphabet to contribute letters used today.

Example: Pelasgic Script

AAB < CD Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ
M Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ

The Greeks had borrowed several of their letters from earlier alphabets; however, it was in this early Greek alphabet that we can identify several of the modern letters.

The Roman square capitals of the fourth and fifth century made the next definite letter standard. This alphabet had a lower case, which was used during the fifth and sixth centuries, and later evolved into the Roman uncial script. It was from this uncial script that the first cursive alphabet developed.

Example: Roman Square Capitals

A B C D E F G H I L
M N O P Q R S T V X

Example: Roman Lower Case

a b c d e f g h i l
m n o p q r s t u x

Example: Roman Uncial Script

A B C D E F G H I L
M N O P Q R S T U X

Example: Roman Cursive Script

a b c d e f g h i l
m n o p q r s t u x

The cursive script became so loose and irregular, that Charlemagne commissioned a new standard script, the Charlemagne Miniscule, which dominated the tenth and eleventh centuries in Europe. This script appears in some of the older French records.

Example: Charlemagne Miniscule

a b c d e f g h i l
m n o p q r s t u x

In northern France, the scribes were influenced by the German epithet, which the Italians dubbed Gothic script, after the barbaric Goths who left their mark on Italy centuries earlier.

Example: Gothic Script

a b c d d e f g h i l
m n o p q r r s t u x

Throughout the Loire valley and parts of southern France, another script had developed from the Roman cursive. This script was taken to England by William in 1066 and is known as French uncial script.

Example: French Uncial Script

a b c d e f g h i l
m n o p q r r t u x

The stage was now set for the many flowery scripts to emerge during the Renaissance, the time period of the earlier French registers.

Elements of Handwriting Style

Minims

The up and down strokes of letters are called "minims." The letters e, i, m, n, u, v, and w are composed almost entirely of minims. When a word has two or more of these letters in a row, the letters can be hard to tell apart, as in the word **commune** below:

commune

Usually you can decipher the word from the context or the format of the record. However, you may have to count the strokes, figure out all the possible letter combinations, and choose the word it most likely resembles.

Linking Strokes

The small u-shaped strokes which connect minims in letters and connect letters in a word are linking strokes. Many French scribes, however, did not link their letters as we do today. Instead of the u-shaped stroke at the foot of the letters, they used an overhead stroke (^). Because of this difference in linking strokes, reading a record can be very confusing, especially when minims are involved. For example, note the linking strokes in the word champagne.

Champagne

Other scribes joined letters with very distinct strokes that at first appear to be a different letter. For instance, in the phrase **baptise Jean** below, the **J** could be mistaken for a **G**, but it is actually a **J**.

baptise Jean

Another problem caused by the overhead linking stroke is that letters are joined in ways different than you might expect. They may have joined d's at the top, or crossed t's by using the cross stroke to join the next letter. Thus, **di** may appear as *di* and **tu** may be written as *tu*.

Compare the various forms of **de** and **et** given below:

de de de
et et et

Capitalization

Many of the earlier writing styles consisted entirely of capitals, or a combination of capitals and lower case letters. It wasn't until the late 1800s that standardized rules for capitalization were internationally applied. Before this time capitals could be used anywhere in a word. Therefore, don't depend on capitalization as a clue in determining the beginning of words, especially in the earlier records.

Example:

<i>Seconde</i>	<i>josePh</i>
Seconde	josePh
<i>elizaBeth</i>	<i>onZe</i>
elisaBeth	onZe

Double lowercase letters at the beginning of a word were used as capitals in some of the earlier records.

pronunciation. Do not extract these marks; however, they can be used to identify vowels when the writing is difficult to read.

temoin nicolas

Temoin Nicolas

These diacritical marks are:

grave aigu circonflexe
tréma cedilla

Identifying Letters

Letters are the building blocks of words. Of all the letters, vowels are the most important because in French they indicate gender, such as **un** (masculine) and **une** (feminine). Vowels also separate the consonants, giving a musical quality to the spoken word. The problem of reading old handwriting is to identify the vowels because of their power to change the words.

Diacritical Marks

In French there are five diacritical marks. All of these marks are either placed over vowels or under the letter **c** to indicate a change in their usual

The **grave** and **aigu** accents appear only over **e**'s. The **circonflexe** and **tréma** appear over any vowel which uses their particular phonetic value. The **cedilla** is placed under the letter **c** to give it an s-sound. The dots over **i**'s and **j**'s may appear as an accent mark in French records but in reality are not.

Finally, you should remember that these marks were only standardized in the late 1700s, and that they appear erratically in earlier records. Diacritical marks from the earlier periods emulated the Latin accent marks, which will be covered under the Brevigraphs heading in this chapter.

Alphabet Variations

A	
a	
B	
b	
C	
c	
D	
d	
E	
e	
F	
f	
G	
g	
H	
h	
I J	
i	

j	jijiji
K	KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK
k	kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk
L	LLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL
l	llllllllllllllllll
M	MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM
m	mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
N	NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN
n	nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn
O	OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
o	oooooooooooooooooooo
P	PPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP
p	pppppppppppppppppp
Q	QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
q	qqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqq
R	RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR
r	rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
S	SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS
s	ssssssssssssssssss
T	TTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT

t	AzA z z t h f z t y t A
U	u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u
u	ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü
V	v v v v v v v v v v v v v v v v
v	u ü u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u
W	w w w w w w w w w w w w w w w w
w	u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u u
X	x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x
x	t s t x x x x x x x x x x x x
Y	y y y y y y y y y y y y y y y y
y	y y y y y y y y y y y y y y y y
Z	z z z z z z z z z z z z z z z z
z	z z z z z z z z z z z z z z z z

A	Mariage	anne	quatre		
	mariage	anne	quatre		
B	Brater	baptizé	Laboureur	decembre	
	Brater	baptizé	Laboureur	decembre	
C	crepet	seconde	cent	nicolas	cette
	crepet	seconde	cent	nicolas	cette

D *vendredi de d'Avril Denommé*
vendredy de d'Avril Denommé

E *etienne Lunéville Epouse elizebeth*
etienne Lunéville Epouse elizabeth

F *Frimaire Dofficier fils Francois*
Frimaire Dofficier (D'officier) fils Francois

G *signé vingt mariage Gerard Grandpère*
Signé vingt mariage Gerard Grandpere

H *Inhumé Joseph huit Aujourd'huy*
Inhumé Joseph huit Aujourd'huy

I *Ivett Aymonin*
Ivett Aymonin

J *Journalier Jean*
Journalier Jean

K *Kaiser Kolb Kleber*
Kaiser Kolb Kleber

L *Luis DeGuillem de Republique Cultivateur*
Luis DeGuillem Republique Cultivateur

M Marie nome pronomés Communal

N Naisance ans parrain marraine donné

O Nicolas témoin Joseph

P le pere por presence baptisée pour

Q que Dominique quatre quarante

R Greffier Ruffier Catherine déclaré

S Sept Savoir Nicolas Six

T et Mathieux l'enfant Jean Baptiste

U audit Brumaire Laboureur Jour

Vendémaire *Victorie*
V Vendémaire Victorie

veuve
veuve

Willimin *Walter*
W Willimin Walter

Wilhelm
Wilhelm

Dix *deux*
X Dix deux

Sexe
Sexe

Citoyen *en yver* *hanry*
Y Citoyen en yver (en hiver) hanry

Elizabeth *onze* *sieziem*
Z Elizabeth onze sieziem (seizieme)

NOTE:

Many examples of letters and styles have been presented here and should serve only as examples. There will always be occasions when you will find a letter that is entirely different from these examples. When this problem arises, there are three extraction techniques that can help you.

First, consider the letter in the context of the word and sentence. This may help you recognize the meaning and hence the letter.

Second, compare the unknown letters of a word with the known letters in the same entry. Many times you can decipher the unknown letter.

Third, keep in mind the order of vowels and consonants in the word. This can help you identify the word.

Numbers

Numbers are normally written out in most of the parish and civil records; however, there are many records which contain numeric characters. These can be very difficult to interpret at times due to their similarity to alphabetic characters.

The major problems you will encounter are mistaking 5's for 6's; and 7's for 9's; and vice versa.

0.

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

1.

1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

2.

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

3.

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

4.

4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

5.

5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5

6.

6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

7.

7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7

8.

8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8

9.

9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9

Abbreviations

In the medieval period it was very common for lawyers, scribes, priests, and other scholars to use abbreviations when creating legal documents. Abbreviations were much more common a century ago, because paper and ink were expensive items, and writing with the old quill pens was very laborious. To save paper, ink, and especially time, scribes shortened their words by abbreviating.

Many times abbreviations were used so extensively that it is almost impossible for modern readers to understand the texts. Because not all scribes used the same abbreviations, learning the language enables the reader to overcome this obstacle. The types of abbreviations encountered in French records are contractions, elisions, raised letters, and brevigraphs.

Raised Letters

For several centuries scribes indicated omitted letters within a word by writing the last letter or letters of the word slightly above the line; thus: **Ma^tie** (**Majestie**), **sacrem^s** (**sacraments**), **J^h** (**Joseph**). Many scribes put a period under or slightly to the right of the raised letters. Raised letters, however, did not always indicate an abbreviation, so you should check closely when they appear in an entry.

Contractions

The most common method of abbreviating words was to omit one or more letters. This is called contraction, and there were no rules as to which letters should be dropped. The context of the record enables the reader to determine the meaning of the word. Such words as **saint** (**st**, **ste**, **s**, or **ss**) **notre** (**nre**, **nre**), and **pretre** (**pte**, **ptb**, **ptre**) are examples of contractions found in French records.

Contractions may also be indicated by a flourish, which may appear as a short stroke above the area where letters have been dropped (Franc) or a longer flourish originating in the area of the dropped letters (Consce). One of the oldest and most frequently used marks indicating contractions was a crescent with a dot above the word. The short abbreviating stroke above an **m** or **n** within a word indicated that an **m** or **n** followed the previous

letter. For example, Ane = Anne and Etiene = Etienne.

Placing a period at the end of a group of letters also indicated a contraction, such as Niv. for Nivose.

In the earlier records, the last four months of the year were frequently abbreviated numerically. This was a carry over from the Julian calendar. These abbreviations should be easy to remember because each month begins with the same sound as the French word for the corresponding number, except eight.

7 bre = Septembre	7 = sept
8 bre = Octobre	8 = huit
9 bre = Novembre	9 = neuf
10 bre = Décembre	10 = dix

The letter x was often used as an abbreviation for Christ; for example, in names such as Christophe = Xophe, Christian, = Xstian or Xian, Christina = Xstina.

Double letters may be employed as an abbreviation for **marrain** or **parrain** as MM or PP, and AAPP has appeared as a plural abbreviation for **aiéules**, (grandparents). When working with French records containing abbreviations, you should be aware of the methods of abbreviating, and realize that each scribe employed his own peculiar method.

Elisions

This type of abbreviation occurs between two words, the first ending in a vowel and the second beginning with a vowel or a silent consonant. The most frequent is the omission of the **e** in **le** or the **a** in **la** before words beginning with a vowel. For example:

le honneur = l'honneur
le enfant = l'enfant

The elision is indicated by the inclusion of an apostrophe in place of the omitted letter. However, the inclusion of the apostrophe depended on the scribe in many cases.

Brevigraphs

Often in the earlier records, you may encounter unusual letters and symbols in the text and be confused as to their meaning. The officiating agents of the earlier records were first trained in Latin, and Latin is a cumbersome language. As a result, a unique shorthand was developed that allowed scribes to speed up the writing process. This Latin shorthand was used by priests whenever they were rushed or encountered an idea which did not presently exist.

It consisted of bars, dots, accent marks, and other symbols and letters. For example: the horizontal bar through an otherwise uncrossed letter meant that it was an abbreviation.

8 bre f t e

There were other symbols that when combined with the first letter of the word, became its abbreviation:

	q q	quia	
P P P	par, per por, pra	q q	quem
p̄ p̄	prae	n̄	non
P P	pro	n̄z	neque
q	qui	v̄ v̄	ven
q	quod	v̄z	videlicet
q	quae	v̄ v̄	vir, vri
q̄	quod	ē ē	em, en
q	qui	c̄ c̄	cur
q̄	qua	bar, ber bre, bir	

Symbols which appear frequently as words in these records are:

= = et 7 = esse












6 6 = con, cum, cun : = est

There were other symbols carrying meaning that were also used in the early records.

Days of the week were named after the planets, sun, and moon.

	Solis	Sunday
	Lunae	Monday
	Martis	Tuesday
	Mercurii	Wednesday
	Jovi	Thursday
	Veneris	Friday
	Saturni	Saturday

Symbols were used to describe the condition of or events of an individual's life.

		Death		Birth
				Death
	Married		Woman	
	Divorced		Man	
			Christened	

There are many other symbols which were used in this Latin shorthand, but these are the most frequently encountered.

Punctuation Marks

The scribes of the Renaissance period were more careless with punctuation marks than with spelling and capitalization. Many, even though employed to write legal and important documents, made no use of punctuation marks whatsoever. The absence and improper use of punctuation marks caused ambiguities and errors, which make your task more difficult.

In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the following punctuation marks were at the disposal of writers:

slash	/
period	.
comma	,
double period	::
inverted question mark	¿
question mark	?
exclamation mark	!
colon	:
horizontal dash	—
semi-colon	;
parenthesis	()
inverted paragraph marks	¶
quotation marks	" "

The use of punctuation marks remained erratic up to the first part of the 1700s before finally becoming standardized.

Variations in Spelling

Although French was standardized in the early 1700s, scribes continued to spell words phonetically in many parts of France. Because some letters are pronounced the same or sound very similar, the scribes often interchanged such letters. The chart which follows shows the letters most often interchanged, and then gives examples of these interchanges in actual words. If a word you cannot recognize in the document contains one of the letters below, try replacing it with the corresponding interchangeable letters.

There will be occasions when you need to interchange more than one letter before you recognize the letter.

A.	-E	Janvier—Jenvier
	-OI	Vannesson—Voinnesson
	-UA	Vannesson—Vuannesson
AU.	-AUL	Maujean—Mauljean
C.	-S	Francoise—Fransoise
D.	-X	Arnoud—Arnoux

E.	-A	Jean—Jan	S.	-SC	Siot—Sciot Savoir—Scaoir
G.	-J	Gean—Jean		-SS	Francoise—Francoisse
I.	-Y	Cimetiere—Cymetiere	U.	-UE	Veuve—Veuve
IE.	-IER	Pallie—Pallier	V.	-B	Février—Febrier
J.	-G	Janvier—Genvier		-FV	Chevre—Chefvre
LD.	-D	Arnould—Arnoud	W.	-V	Wannesson—Vannesson
OULD.	-EAU	Arnould—Arneau	X.	-Z	Sixieme—Sizieme
	-OUX	Arnould—Arnoux	Y.	-I	Ydres—Idres
S.	-Z	Quinsieme—Quinzieme	Z.	-S	Onzieme—Onsieme

Self-evaluation

CHAPTER FIVE

On a separate sheet of paper, transcribe the following words:

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----|------------------|
| 1. | <i>nudoz</i> | 11. | <i>Marie</i> |
| 2. | <i>Boumerie</i> | 12. | <i>marra ine</i> |
| 3. | <i>Baptiste</i> | 13. | <i>le pere</i> |
| 4. | <i>tenz</i> | 14. | <i>quatre</i> |
| 5. | <i>dedie</i> | 15. | <i>Guffier</i> |
| 6. | <i>fil</i> | 16. | <i>Mathieu</i> |
| 7. | <i>vngt</i> | 17. | <i>Eponse</i> |
| 8. | <i>svit</i> | 18. | <i>Cito y en</i> |
| 9. | <i>7^o zeph</i> | 19. | <i>Siziem</i> |
| 10. | <i>Cultivateur</i> | 20. | <i>Affix</i> |

Please check your responses with the answers in Appendix C.