

Reading German Handwriting

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I. Where More?

- A. References Sütterlin or Kurrent script [Some also Gothic or Fraktur type]
 - 1. Indiana German Heritage Society, Witter's Deutsch-Englische Schreib- und Lese-Fibel und Neues Erstes Lesebuch für Amerikanische Freischulen [Witter's German-English Primer and New First German Reader for Public Schools], reprint of 1881 (Nashville: NCSA Literatur, 1987). Buy, \$5, <http://www.ighs.org/>; online Google books.
 - 2. Edna Bentz, *If I Can You Can Decipher Germanic Records* (San Diego: Bentz, 1982)
 - 3. Roger Minert, *Deciphering Handwriting in German Docs* (Provo: GRT, 2001)
 - 4. Tutorial: <https://script.byu.edu/>
 - 6. Family History Library: https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Germany_Handwriting
 - 7. Compgen: http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Alte_deutsche_Handschriften
- C. Vocabulary: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/German_Genealogical_Word_List
- D. Dictionaries: (1) https://dict.leo.org/ende/index_de.html; (2) <http://dict.tu-chemnitz.de/>

II. Old German Alphabet and Confusing Script Letters

- A. Caps: M vs W, N vs St, K vs R.
- B. Small: n, u, m, e, i, and c. Also, upside down r and v and w.
- C. Three German "s": (1)start and middle of word; (2)double ss, Eszett ß; (3)end of word.
- D. Combination letters: sch, tz, qu.
- E. Don't confuse old German h identical to old English s and double ss!
- E. Learn to write the surname sought to recognize it when you see it!
- F. Writing enables reading. The more practice, the greater the ability.

III. Standard Content (Order may Differ)

- A. Baptism: Child's name, DOB, DOBp, parents (occupation & status) [in U.S., origin if recent immigrant], witnesses (occupation), pastor. Options: number of child, legitimate/illegitimate, DOM parents, DOB previous child.
- B. Marriage: (option = Dates of banns), DOM, Groom (occupation) [in U.S., origin if recent immigrant], parents (occupation), Groom age or DOB, Bride (maiden name or former married name) [in U.S., origin if recent immigrant], parents (occupation) or former husband (occupation), Bride age or DOB, witnesses, pastor.
- C. Other records also have standard content: passports, wills, land, tax, even recipes.
- D. Learn the standard content; know what to expect!

IV. Reading Techniques

- A. **Anticipate** the standard content!
- B. Identify parts—father, mother, child, witnesses—read each separately.
- C. Copy and read every entry on page—both for practice and standard content.
- D. **Find known**—given names, months, numbers spelled out, basic words.
- E. **Compare**, compare, compare unknown to known, both words and letters. Seek other instances on same word or letter on same and adjacent pages.
- F. Proceed very slowly from end! Latest = most like the current.
- G. **Extremes**: Can't read? What IS visible? Even the most obscure is possible!
 - 1. Use word shape and size, ascending and descending letters.

2. Apply photo techniques: magnify, change brightness and contrast.

H. **Substitute** all vowels, including i=y.

I. **Trace**; try to write. Or type with blanks, then apply spell checker in word processing.

J. REPEAT—take a second look! And 3rd, 4th, etc! Revisit again and again!

K. KEY = PRACTICE both READING and WRITING!! We improve as we learn.

V. Watch Out for Calendars, Symbols, Etc.

A. In U.S.=Gerlish! [mixed German English].

B. Alternate month names require conversion (many online conversion charts):

1. Julian calendar: pre-1582 Europe (pre-1752 British Empire, including U.S.) Used Latin names months: 7br=Sep, 8br=Oct, 9br=Nov, Xbr=Dec in old Julian calendar!!
2. Religious calendar dates—Easter, Pentecost, Epiphany, Trinity Sunday, etc.

C. All churches used Latin; eg: “do.” for ditto; ejd. or edm. for ejusdem or eodem=the same!

D. German symbols:

1. German symbols for birth *, marriage oo, death +
2. “-“ over German letter doubles letter.
3. “U bogen” over letter u distinguishes it from letter n in German.
4. Vowels umlauted: ä, ö, ü = ae, oe, ue especially in U.S., but also 19th Cent. Germany.
5. Symbols dividing words at line’s end = : -.

E. Administrative jurisdiction term precedes the place name in German. Example:

Crainfeld, KREIS Lauterbach, PROVINZ OberHessen, GROSSHERZOGTUM Hessen-Darmstadt
Crainfeld, Lauterbach COUNTY, OberHessen PROVINCE, GRAND-DUCHY of Hessen-Darmstadt

F. German Language:

1. Nouns capitalized
2. Der (m), Die (f), Das (n), before nouns
3. Long combined words
4. Verbs at end of sentence
5. Grammar: word endings for feminine or diminutive

VI. Word Still Unclear? More Reading Tips

A. Medical, administrative, job, or other old terms, try:

1. A pre-WWII German-English Dictionary
2. Terms on many web sites, eg: Compgen <http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Portal:Lexika>
3. Surname spelling: another entry may be clearer! Especially at end of volume or in baptisms of couple’s other children or prior or subsequent marriages for each.

B. Place Anglicized or misspelled, try:

1. Alternate place name endings, eg: ...hain vs. ...heim.
2. Reverse place indexes: Minert, Roger P, *X State Place Name Indexes :...* (Woods Cross, UT: GRT publications, c 2000>)
3. Now in another country? Convert old German to current Polish, Czech, etc:
<http://www.jewishgen.org/communities/loctown.asp> or
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Germany_Gazetteers

VIII. Summary

A. Learn standard content. Anticipate! Find Known words and abbreviations.

B. COMPARE! Copy entire page to have something to compare.

C. Extremes: Enlarge. Use ascending/descending letters and word shape/size.

D. REVIEW over and over again!

E. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE! The more practice, the greater the ability.

Deutsche Schrift

A a *A a* A a
 B b *B b* B b
 C c *C c* C c
 D d *D d* D d
 E e *E e* E e
 F f *F f* F f
 G g *G g* G g

P p *P p* P p
 Q q *Q q* Q q
 R r *R r* R r
 S s *S s* S s
 T t *T t* T t
 U u *U u* U u
 V v *V v* V v

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H h *H h* H h
 I i *I i* I i
 J j *J j* J j
 K k *K k* K k
 L l *L l* L l
 M m *M m* M m
 N n *N n* N n
 O o *O o* O o

W w *W w* W w
 X x *X x* X x
 Y y *Y y* Y y
 Z z *Z z* Z z
 Ch ch *Ch ch* ch
 Sch sch *Sch sch* sch
 ß ß *ß ß* sz tz

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Basic Vocabulary for Religious Records*

1. Baptism	Taufen, Getauft, gt., get.
2. Born	Gebornen, geb.
3. Bride	Braut
4. Burials, buried	Begraben, Bestattungen
5. Church	Kirche
6. Daughter	Tochter
7. Death, died	Tod, Todt, Sterb, Gestorben, gst.
8. Father	Vater
9. Groom	Bräutigam
10. The late, the deceased	Weiland, Verstorbene
11. Legitimate	Ehelich, ehe, ehl.
12. Marriage, marry	Heiraten, Trauen, verheiraten; Copuliert(Lt)
13. Married couple	Eheleute, ehl.
14. Minister; Church office	Pfarrer, Pf., Pfr.; Pfarramt
15. Mother	Mutter
16. Parents	Eltern
17. The same (day, date)	des selben; eodem(Lt)
18. Single, unmarried	ledig
19. Son	Sohn
20. Surviving	Hindlassen, Hinterlassen, Ruckgelassen, Nachgelassen
21. Wife, spouse	Frau, Hausfrau, Ehefrau, Ehegattin, Gattin, Ehewieb, geliebte
22. Witness/God parent	Zeuge(n), taufzeugen, Pathen, Gevatter(n)
23. Widow/Widower	Wittib, Wittwe/Wittiber, Wittwer, verwitwetet, wt., verw.

*Does NOT include all possible forms of German words!