

One problem people face is reading old handwriting. Prior to Noah Webster's An American Dictionary of the English Language being published in 1828, spelling was primarily done phonetically. In other words, people spelled words and names the way they sounded. Making matters more difficult, people originating from countries besides England spoke with different accents, and people from different parts of England had different dialects. Therefore the surname of "Abel" can be found spelled as "Able," "Abell," or "Abel," and the given name of "Rebecca" may be found spelled as "Rebeca," "Rebecka," "Rebekka," or "Rebecca." To the genealogy researcher this means that "Rebeca Abell" in one census record could quite possibly be the same "Rebekka Able" in a different census record. Census records are often the most difficult to read due to non-standardized spelling, census takers were often in a hurry and/or tired from traveling from home to home and writing causing letters to be added or omitted, and that the person submitting the information may have been difficult for the census taker to understand. Penmanship also plays a major role in the difficulty of reading old handwriting.

To minimize transcription errors we must first familiarize ourselves with the basics of the old ways of writing. This step is not difficult.

Recognize the alphabet and numbers: *Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0*

Note that the letters "I" and "J" are similar in appearance, as are the letters "L" and "S" and "H" and "K." To avoid errors when deciphering or transcribing words, it often helps to look at additional information (such as whether the person's name in question is listed as male or female) and to say the word aloud. For instance, when having difficulty reading the name "*Susan*" check to see if this person's gender is indicated elsewhere. For example, if this person is female, chances are good that the name is not **Lusan** but **Susan**; if male, it's quite possible that the name is **Lucian** and has merely been poorly written. Keep all previously mentioned possible factors in mind. Remember that penmanship varies from person to person, but that most try to stay within the guidelines of the cursive alphabet.

One common problem in reading old handwriting is the "double 'S' rule." Today when a word contains two consecutive letters "S" they are written in the same manner, whereas in old documents they were written as *fs*. "*Sessions*" is an example of the surname "Sessions" which could be mistakenly read as "Sefsions." In an old court document the word "confession" could be written as: "*confession.*"

It is also suggested that we use recognized words as a guide to reading other words. Check for regularities in the penmanship style of the person's handwriting we are trying to read. Once we have several words recognized we may then apply the recognized letters to other harder-to-read words and will have great success in deciphering those words.