

German Language and Handwriting



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1st hour is all about handwriting and of course language related problems you might come across while searching for your German speaking ancestors. It will be not possible to learn to read old German records in one hour, but hopefully after reading this you will have a basic understanding of the topic and know how to learn the German letters the most effective way.



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This is what is covered in this lesson.

Some history of handwriting with some examples. We take a look into the Sütterlin style which is easier to read than the Deutsche Schreibschrift style. And then you will start to read some records.

As you know the Germans have some special letters and ligatures, it will be also shortly talked about abbreviations, the date format in several German variations, the German grammar, and lastly about different feast days mentioned in German records.



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Deciphering early German handwriting can be a challenge. Handwriting evolved over time in German-speaking countries. The German handwriting started as many other styles with the Latin letters.

Most of the time in the handwritten genealogical interesting documents was used the same style as it was used for letters.



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Besides the script, many early records were frequently composed in open paragraph form and not in columns. By the 1300s, many wrote in the so-called Cursive script.



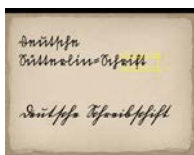
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By the 1500s some areas went back to the more Latin style letters but the majority continued with the different Gothic styles. The influence of the baroque introduced again the Latin letters in some areas, while the other areas stayed true to the Kurrente style.



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By 1800 the Latin based letters finally lost the battle in the non-official handwriting used by the majority of people. About 50 different handwriting styles were used in the German speaking areas of Middle Europe. Most genealogy-related records will have one of these 50 styles looking very much like the Deutsche Schreibrift (top right) or a mixture between this style and Kurrente. The Prussian Ministry of Cultural Affairs asked in 1911 Ludwig Sütterlin to develop a handwriting style that is easier to write. It was introduced in 1915 on all Prussian schools, and even some non-Prussian schools adopted it. Since parish priests and civil servants are usually older you will find more often the Deutsche Schreibrift style in all the records, not so much the Sütterlin style. Finally the Nazis banned the Gothic writing styles and in schools was taught the Lateinische Schreibrift. It took until 1960 until all teachers obeyed, and taught the Latin based handwriting style, which was in the beginning a little different than the style taught today.



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And this is actually the difference between the younger Sütterlin style (on top) and the older Deutsche Schreibrschrift style (below). Sütterlin style is vertical and more “spiky”. Also the exact division between the lines was important.



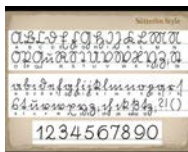
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While the most significant characteristic for the Deutsche Schreibrschrift style was the inclination and the exact division into three same parts (the computer did not let me do half pixel steps, therefore it is a little bit off)



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You might find in various literature different names or spellings for one and the same style, even though there are sometimes differences. Deutsche Schreibrschrift is the official German term for the handwriting style before Sütterlin. American records translate this into Old German Handscript or Gothic, even though Gothic also covers printed letters. Kurrent or Current (spelled with C) is actually the pre-1800 style but many do not make a difference here. Fraktur refers to a specific printing typeface, normally used in Germany prior to World War II. Ausgangsschrift, sometimes translated as German cursive style refers only to the Sütterlin style. There is a lot of confusion out there.



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Let’s dive into the Sütterlin alphabet, since this one is supposedly easier to read. You will find a computer generated Sütterlin font in the tool box, there is no copyright on it. Please feel free to use it in a word document if you are not sure how a specific name might look like in this style. The web-address for the tool-box is found on the very last slide.

You may also start to hand-copy the letters found on your old document on a sheet of paper until you get a feel for it.



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The Deutsche Schreibrift style as an example. Also here you will find a computer font in the tool box for your word documents, plus two other which are even older.

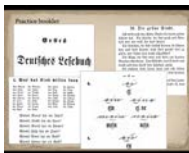
Both examples are also in the syllabus.



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If you did not deal too much with the German script, you might start with reading printed records.

The printed style was actually the Fraktur style mentioned a minute ago, only a few, especially capital letters are different from the Latin based letters – but other than this is wonderful to read.



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There are included two PDF-files into the tool box available to you for you to print out and practice. It starts with simple letter combinations in the Deutsche Schreibrift style and ends with short texts in the printed Fraktur style.



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After you became somehow familiar with the letters you start to practice on records where Latin based and old German based letters mixed. Often were names written in Latin based letters and the rest in the traditional German style.



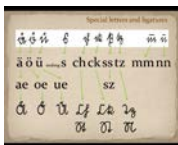
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While practicing these letters try also to recognize key data, like town names, dates, family names, relationships, and other data that is important to you. Practice on different handwriting styles and on different types of records, like parish records, civil registry records, court records, or whatever you might come across.



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After you became familiar with the documents it gets more challenging. Here is an example with a transcription. Try a transcription yourself. This is how many of the pre-1750 records look like; and often are the names are somewhere in the text block and not like here separated on the left side of the entry.



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Let's go to the special letters and ligatures. The special letters are the Umlaut letters, ä, ö, and ü. The diacritics are sometimes replaced by the letter e after the base letter, same applies to capital letters.

The ending "s", the fourth letter in the upper row, is different from the standard s, which looks more like a stick (as you can see on the sz letter). The ending -s is always replacing the stick on the end of a word. It can appear in the middle of a word if that word consists of two combined words where each word could stand by itself (like Hauskauf – house purchase).

Let's move first to the last two letters. An m and an n with a stroke above it means that that letter is doubled. It applies only to these two letters. There are no capital MM or NN.

Now let's talk about the ligatures. Ligatures are two letters combined into one sound.

Letter Ch, sometimes pronounced K, very common found in names of persons and towns, rule of thumb: on the beginning of a word it sounds like a K, e.g Christian, in the middle of a word like ch, e.g. Mechtild.

Letter Ck is always pronounced like a k, e.g. Zucker. There is no Ck on the beginning of a word.

The letter Tz is pronounced C, like in the first name Matze. Words starting with tz are seldom, but more commonly found in older record.

The sharp s, some call it the pregnant B, is a letter that was discouraged from use in the German alphabet starting in the 1990s. It stands never on the beginning of a word. Today it is replaced by ss, until the 1980s it was transliterated as sz in blue print documents and the early computer world.

The last ligature is Sch, pronounced like in Schwarz.

The St is not a ligature but let me mention it here because it confuses sometimes researchers, especially written on the beginning of a word. If you write it the newer way it is easy to recognize. But written the more common way (right of it), it could be mistaken for a capital N (as seen on the very right), especially with bad handwriting.



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Here are some letters that are more challenging, especially the circled one. Often you can only read them because of the whole word that contain that specific letter. And this is actually one of the tricks genealogists use – you read the word loud and listen whether or not the sound makes sense in the German language.

Especially of interest might be the last three elements on the last line, the German currency Mark, the sz or pregnant B for the Austrian currency Schilling, and the symbol often placed between day and month (like the English 1st 2nd 3rd)

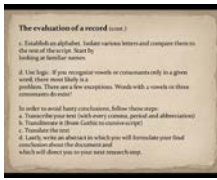


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How to evaluate a record:

First isolate the data from the rest of the text. Then think phonetically by saying the word loud, replacing the sound of letters.

Same rule applies to town names, they often changed in history. Often you will find an older spelling on Wikipedia.



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Look at the existing handwriting and create your own alphabet from it.

Use logic. If it does not sound anything like German, it's very likely not German.

Keep in back of your mind that there are sometimes exceptions: There are words with two of the same vowels in a row, like Haarmann (double-a) or three consonants, like Schifffahrer (three-f).

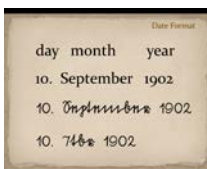
A good way to deal with difficult texts: transcribe it in the old handwriting (including all grammatical errors); transliterate it into Latin based letters; translate it into English; and abstract the information needed that lead to the next step.

Abbreviations			
geh.	g+h	geboren	born
ehel.	e+h+l	ehelich	legitimate
gert.	g+r+t	getraut	married (m)
verh.	v+w+h	verheiratet	married (w)
verst.	v+r+s+t	verstorben	deceased, died
gest.	g+s+t	gestorben	died
best.	b+s+t	bestätigt	confirmed
gen.	g+n	genosse	also known as
unehel.	u+n+h+l	unehelich	illegitimate
S.d.	S	Sohn des	son of
T.d.	T	Tochter des	daughter of

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These are the most used abbreviations found in German parish records (more about it in the lesson about sources). You find the complete list in the tool box.

Try to write these abbreviations with the same handwriting as your documents and have that paper handy when you do the research in these old documents.



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Dates might be abbreviated in records. Unlike Americans, Germans write a punctuation mark after the day, and always in the order: day, month, and year.



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Be aware of this trap. It is **not** July through October, but September through December. It is because of Latin, the letters seven through 10 are: septem, octo, novem, and decem.



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Here is an image of a record how a month is abbreviated in the manner we talked about in the previous slide. It includes also the filling symbol between date and month (which can have several shapes).

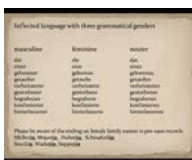
There are no such abbreviations for January through August



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A few slides dedicated to the German grammar, since grammar is part of the German language

There are slides to each of these subjects. After this part of the lesson just keep in the back of your mind that German words are not as static as it is the case in the English language.



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These words will show up regularly in German records. If you can't make out the sex of the persons' name, these words might provide the clue. A child or a couple is always neuter (like in English).

Let me mention something you should know: the ending **-in** for females. It has its roots in Latin and was adopted into the German language – but today it's not used any more. Most of the times the ending is **-in** (99%), but depending on the last letter of the family name it can be just an -n or a –rin. Look up how the male child or father or husband is spelled and then enter that way into your genealogy program.



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Possessive S – always when someone belongs to a person, a wife to a husband, a child to a father or mother. Two ways you will find this in records.

Anna, des Hubers' Frau ist Patin [Anna, the wife of the Huber is the godmother].

The other way is used when additional information is displayed. Then the possessive s moves to another word: Agnes, des Georg Kneschk, Gärtners in Kuckau [Agnes, legitimate daughter of Georg Kneschk, a plot holder in Kuckau]. The possessive s is here not on the family name, but on the social status. It can be also attached to the profession.



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Verb inflection:

You will find the record written in two different ways: in the first or third person, never in second person. About 90% of records in 3rd person.

And then the record is also written as either singular or plural (for twins or triplets). Most records are logically in 3rd person, singular, as example shows.

[Den 21 Jan: Abends ům 10 Uhr gebohren ůnd den 22 hujus allhier von dem Herrn Capellan Georgio Cziesch getaũft Sebastian, Nicolaus Kneschke ůnd Apollonia ehl. Sohn. Lev. war GeorgeTsoch aũs Kũckaũ, Testes Jacob Mietel, und Agnes Nicolaus Biarschen Eheweib, alle bejde aũs Kũckaũ.

On the 21st January in the evening at 10 was born and baptized on the 22nd same month here [Crostwitz] by chaplain George Cziesch was Sebastian, legitimate son of Nicolaus Kneschke and Apollonia. Godparent was George Tsoch of Kuckau. Witnesses: Jacob Mietel; Agnes, wife of Nicolaus Biarsch; both from Kuckau.



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If an event reported, such as a baptism, marriage, or death, past tense is used – each language the same, including English. In the German language often a prefix is added to the word to make it past tense [plus the ending changes often, but this can be ignored.

Most common in genealogy related documents are the prefixes ge- and ver-. There are a few more, but you will see them rather seldom. If you do not find a word in a dictionary, drop the prefix and then look again for a word that looks similar.



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The word order in German does not have such strict rules as it is the case in English. When you read the English text on this slide, which is an (almost) word by word translation, you get a feeling how the German text is structured – grammatical a little bit different – but still easy to understand. This text comes from actual christening record found in a parish book.

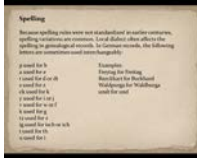


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Even though this slide could be also put into the Sources workshop later on, let's talk about it now since it has to do with the alphabet – and the alphabet is grammar related.

Different publications sort the Umlaut-letters in different ways. There was no standardized way before WWII. Most of them will do it as you can see on the image: After the Bo – d will follow the Bo - e, and as we know the ligature oe is actually Umlaut ö.

Always check the index on several spots before you close the book in frustration.



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Here is a more complete list of interchangeable letters in German records. We talked about this shortly when we listed the steps to evaluate a record. Since this is not in the syllabus, this slide is found in the tool box.



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Enough grammar for today. Something you should be aware of are the name changes between Latin and German. It became almost a fashion among priests to Latinize family names.

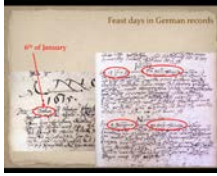
You will find in the tool box a file with about 500 Latinized family names. If you still have not found the name of your ancestor there, try to use a Latin dictionary.

If your ancestors came from a German area where also a Slavic language was spoken (like Lüneburg area up to 1748) or East-Saxony (still today), you might have Slavic family names recorded there. Since the Slavic tribes in Germany were suppressed, many families changed their names to the German spelling or translated it. When they gave up their Slavic language they had more professional and educational opportunities. Also the Slavic-German file is included in the tool box.



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In the majority of records you will find only four time specifications: full hour, quarter past, half past the full hour, and quarter to the full hour. If the birth was somewhere between the people rounded up or down. Almost like English, just in case you need it, you will find it in the tool box.



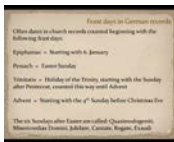
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Let's talk about the last subject in this first hour: the feast days.

Sometimes you will not find a date but just e.g. "After the 5th Trinitatis was married ..." or "21st Trinitatis ...". Trinitatis (or the Holiday of the Holy Trinity) is the first Sunday after Pentecost (as mentioned on the right image).

The left image shows the Epiphany Holiday. Epiphany is celebrated on Jan. 6, the first Epiphany is the following Sunday.

And sometimes you get lucky because the parish priest recorded the feast day and the actual date together (as seen on the right image)



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Epiphany and Trinitatis are the two dates mostly found.

Advent was also recorded, as 1st Advent, 2nd Advent, 3rd and 4th Advent.

Easter Sunday was sometimes recorded as Pessach and the six Sundays after Easter are recorded as: Quasimodogeniti, Misericordias Domini (or just Misericordias), Jubilate, Cantate, Rogate, and Exaudi.



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If you are one like me that does not have all the different dates for the last 300 years memorized, use a website to find out when these specific dates were in history. Only available in German, if you find one in English, please e-mail me.

You go this website (address in syllabus), enter the year and it shows you when the different feast days were in that year. Unfortunately no data is available before the year 1700. Other disadvantage: it calculates only according to the Gregorian calendar (and ignores the date changes of the Julian calendar).

If your ancestors were the last one to switch from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1760, you need to use another website to calculate the difference (more about the calendars in the third hour, including the other website address).



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Questions I might answer? Or maybe not?

You have the chance to contact me. And this is the address to the tool box I mentioned a few times.