

How to Read 18th Century British-American Writing

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18th Century Reading and Writing

Historians soon learn not to assume that people in the past thought about and experienced life in the same ways that we do today. Something as basic to us as writing was quite different in 18th Century British-America. British-Americans in that century spoke English, yet they used words that we do not, and we use words that did not even exist then. 18th Century pronunciation differed from ours, and many of the rules of spoken and written usage differed as well.

In Martha Ballard's time, not everyone could read fluently, and even fewer people could write. Literacy estimates vary, but it is thought that almost all of the adult New England population at the end of the eighteenth century could read at least to some degree. Maybe half of those could write. The ability to read the printed word did not necessarily result in the ability to read handwriting. Likewise, the ability to write one's name or copy phrases in one "hand" or style did not necessarily mean that the same person could compose original prose.

Reading and writing were taught separately, as separate skills. The amount and type of one's reading or writing skills depended on class, occupation, and gender. In British colonial America, reading was taught so

Handwriting Samples from *The American Young Man's Best Companion*



"An easy Copy for Round Hand"



"The Italian Hand"

that both males and females could read the Christian Bible. It was thought that women especially, did not need to express their own thoughts as much as they needed to be able to read the Christian Word. Males progressed in school and learned to read in order to carry on business or professional occupations. Some, but by no means all, of the upper classes became literate as a sign of good breeding and education. Typically, fewer women than men could read.

Writing in colonial America was also a predominantly male skill, tied strongly to occupation and class. Lawyers and their clerks, scholars, physicians, clergy, and business people needed to be able to write. It was felt that most women did not need to know how to write, nor did farmers, artisans, non-whites, and the lower classes. Most Black slaves were kept illiterate as a means of social control.

Martha Ballard's lifetime straddled the colonial and early national periods of United States history. Her schooling as a girl began before the American Revolution. After the American Revolution, the idea of Republican Motherhood invited more schooling for females. It was argued that women would be the mothers and first teachers of the republic's future (male) citizens, so females needed to be well-educated. How could they teach what they didn't know? As a writing female who kept a diary, Martha Ballard was unusual for her time. She would have been less unusual in the next century when diary keeping became a fashionable female avocation.



"Flourishing Alphabet"



"German Hand"



"It is necessary for all those who would qualify themselves for Business to imitate this print hand"

Penmanship instruction in the eighteenth century consisted of copying different "hands," which were different calligraphic styles. Penmanship books showed alphabets, sayings, and business forms in different hands. Students copied these exactly, for practice and reference. Writing practice for females was not based on commerce but on accepted female skills. Thus girls learned to stitch alphabets and maxims onto samplers while boys practiced on slates and paper. Many samplers survive today.

Different hands were considered proper and appropriate according to style, class, gender, and occupation. For example, 18th century females used the *Italiante* hand, which was considered easier to learn and more feminine in appearance. Men in commerce were expected to use a hand that inspired confidence and demonstrated self-assurance. By contrast, the earlier arcane, very difficult to read Court Hands of England were not favored in the more democratic early national period of the United States.

Materials were unlike today's. Martha Ballard folded and cut individual sheets of paper for her diary. Writers had to make and sharpen their own quills. Ink could be made according to recipes or mixed from dried ink powder that could be purchased.

By looking at 18th century writing, studying who wrote what, and reading 18th century penmanship books, one can develop a "feel" for the era and learn to read period manuscripts. Unfamiliar writing styles, quirks of individual writers who do not follow standard writing patterns, and problems with the materials such as ink blotches, fading ink, and discolored paper can pose intriguing reading challenges.

Here are some characteristics of 18th century British-American handwriting that might make for difficult reading until you get used to it.

Some Characteristics of 18th century British-American Handwriting

- There were no typewriters, so personal writing was handwritten. Commercial writing was handwritten or printed with type on a press.
- Upper case letters were used to begin nouns as well as to begin sentences.
- The lower case *s* was written in elongated form at the beginning of a word, in the middle of a word, and when written twice, as in *pass*. The elongated *s* can be mistaken for an *f*, and *ss* can look something like a *p*.
- Shortened versions of words were indicated by beginning the word in regular-sized letters and ending with superscript letters, maybe with a line underneath where the missing letters would be. [Martha Ballard used superscript](#) to shorten words. Some writers simply shortened words and left no other indication of the missing letters.
- Spelling was not standardized. Writers would spell words differently in different documents or even within a single document. Look at Martha Ballard's spelling and notice how much it varied. Like many other informal writers of her time, [Martha often spelled her words phonetically](#), using the way the words sounded as a guide. Although challenging to read, such spelling tells us much about pronunciation before sound recordings existed.
- In words like [the](#), *y* could stand for the *th* and the *e* was added in superscript. The *y* was pronounced as we pronounce a *th* today.
- In some hands, upper case *K*, *P*, and *R* can look similar, as can *J* and *T*. Also, at times *L* and *S* will be confusing because of similarities.

Steps in Deciphering Handwritten Documents

The more 18th century writing you read, the easier it will become. If you are having difficulty reading a handwritten document, you could try some of these suggestions:

- Look at the document as a primary source. Try to find answers to the basic questions: Who wrote this document? When? What does it say? Why? How?

- In trying to date the document, consider the kind of writing instrument used, the type and date of the paper, the style of writing, the author, and internal evidence such as dates, names, and events mentioned.
- Study samples of hands from penmanship books of the time and become familiar with the varieties of hands.
- In the document you are trying to read, find words that you know.
- Use internal evidence to help you. Figure out what kind of document this is and become familiar with some of the standard phrases likely to appear in such a document at that time. For instance, look at some deeds or probate records. Certain legal phrases are likely to appear and reappear.
- Begin transcribing the document by writing the words you know and leaving space to write the mystery words once you decipher them.
- Put guesses in brackets in your transcription. The brackets say, "This could be this word or these letters, but I'm not quite sure." For example, notice the brackets in the [McCausland transcription](#) of Martha Ballard's diary.
- Find individual letters in the document, using the letters in the words you know as guides. Compare and compare. Eventually you will start to recognize letters and then combinations of letters more easily.
- Read odd looking words aloud, phonetically. Maybe the sound will help you recognize an oddly-spelled word.
- If the writer is particularly idiosyncratic and hard to decipher, create a personalized alphabet guide by marking letters on a photocopy. You could also cut and paste a photocopy to create a complete alphabet style sheet to use as a reference.
- Look up odd and unfamiliar words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This multivolume dictionary is the most complete available and includes archaic and obscure words unlikely to appear in abridged dictionaries.
- Some words associated with particular occupations or sciences might also be found in eighteenth-century instructional texts about those subjects.
- Get knowledgeable professional help if faded ink makes reading impossible. Ultraviolet light, various chemical treatments, photographing with colored filters, and infrared photographing are options that might help. Professionals with the proper equipment and know-how will help ensure that the treatment doesn't damage the document.
- Return to the document several times after leaving it for awhile. Sometimes clarity will intervene, and words you could not recognize before will seem simple to read later.

- Ask others what they think mystery words say. Sometimes fresh eyes will see what you do not.
- Enjoy the quest!

Excerpts from *The American Young Man's Best Companion*



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