



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TRANSCRIBING MANUSCRIPTS

Rules Worked Out by the Minnesota Historical Society

Adapted in 2004 by Lydia Lucas
from the original pamphlet
by Grace Lee Nute
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INTRODUCTION

Transcription of handwritten manuscripts is undertaken with two goals in mind: to give a truthful representation of what the writer actually wrote, and to make the printed copy easy for the reader to comprehend. The transcriber should make him/herself as inconspicuous as possible in the transcribed document, while still adding those annotations that may be needed for clarification. This manual introduces some of the standard conventions utilized to attain these goals.

FORMATTING THE TRANSCRIBED DOCUMENTS

Transcriptions should be prepared using a standard word processing program, and without the use of tables, frames, or similar formatting devices. This helps ensure that the text can readily be transported from one presentation environment to another, as needed or desired.

TYPE FONT. The type font chosen should be clear and easy on the eyes, with distinct characters, so that there will be no confusion among letters or between letters and numbers. Times Roman, Book Antiqua, and Garamond are suitable choices for this purpose; Arial is less suitable.

PAGE NUMBERS. Every page of a multi-page document should be numbered, except the first page. The standard location for page numbers is either centered in a running footer, or in the upper right-hand corner of the page in a running header. Just the number is sufficient; it should not be preceded by “Page” or “p.”

MARGINS. It may be desirable to leave a 1½ inch margin on the left-hand side of the page, to permit the finished transcription to be bound if desired. An inch on the other three sides is enough.

HEADINGS

Consider whether supplying headings that identify the documents and their provenance will facilitate their future use. In general, if the transcription is to remain with the original document, it probably does not require a formal heading. If it will, or might, be presented in some other setting apart from the original, it is desirable to employ a standardized means of identifying what the document is and where it came from.

When a heading seems desirable, the Minnesota Historical Society uses a two-part heading, consisting of a caption or title, and beneath it a code in square brackets. The caption identifies the nature and date of the document, and may give other miscellaneous information of use to the reader, such as the fact that the name of the author or recipient is unknown or has been supplied from other sources; that the document was a translation; or the circumstances of the transcription. The code tells where the original document is to be found, and whether it was

written in the author's hand or otherwise. The preferred placement for the heading is in the upper left-hand corner of the first page of the transcription.

Standard abbreviations for the most common types of original documents include:

MS.	Manuscript
A.D.	Autograph Document [basically, any handwritten manuscript that is not a letter, memorandum, or diary]
A.D.S.	Autograph Document Signed
A.J.	Autograph Journal
A.L.	Autograph Letter [handwritten; writer is known but the letter is not signed]
A.L.S.	Autograph Letter Signed
A.N.	Autograph Note
Df.	Draft
D.S.	Document Signed [the body of the document is written or printed by someone other than the signer]
L.	Letter
L.P.C.	Letter Press Copy
L.S.	Letter Signed
M.	Memorandum
T.L.S.	Typed Letter Signed

SOME EXAMPLES.

John Smith to William Crooks, August 5, 1840
[American Fur Company MSS. – L.S.]

Charles Harris to William Clark, [January 5, 1830]
[Clark MSS. – A.L.S.]
(the date has been supplied by the editor or the cataloger)

Diary of Jedediah D. Stevens, September 9, 1829-April 2, 1830
[Stevens MSS. – A.D.]

John Cole to ----, January 1, 1823
(the recipient's name is not known)

[John Cole] to James Groghan, January 1, 1823
(the author's name was supplied by the editor or the cataloger)

General store account book of John Cole, 1868-1870
[Cole Papers – A.D.]

Reminiscence of John Cole, [ca. 1875]
[transcribed in 1985 from original in Cole MSS., Wis. Hist. Soc. – A.D.S.]
(date of reminiscence supplied by the cataloger)

PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION

Punctuation and capitalization call for many decisions. There are two overall approaches: to use modern practice, or to adhere to the style of the original manuscript. Whichever approach is chosen should be applied consistently throughout the document or the transcription project, and this decision should be recorded as part of the project documentation. Modern practice is appropriate for reminiscences and other formal and semi-formal items. Transcriptions of letters, diaries, and the like should adhere to the original items as closely as is practical, since this helps preserve for the reader a sense of the character of the originals.

PERIODS. Dashes at the ends of sentences are regularly converted into periods, if it is clear that the dash was intended to serve this purpose. Periods or dashes under raised letters are omitted in transcribing. In carelessly written documents, periods often resemble commas. At the end of a sentence, such an ambiguous mark is interpreted as a period. If no mark of punctuation is used at the end of a sentence, either a “sentence space” (three spaces on the keyboard) is left between sentences, or a period is inserted enclosed in square brackets.

DASHES. A dash is indicated thus in typing: -- (many word processing programs will convert this to a long single dash). When the author omits letters in proper names, use a triple or quadruple hyphen (so the word processor won't convert it).

QUOTATION MARKS. These are used only when an actual quotation (enclosed in quotation marks) is found within the document that is being transcribed. Use the double quote marks (“”). They follow a question mark or an exclamation mark that is part of the quotation; they precede a question mark or exclamation mark that is not part of the quotation. They always follow the comma and the period whether or not these are part of the quotation. They always precede the colon and semicolon.

PARENTHESES AND BRACKETS. In general, parentheses are used when they are part of the original document, and square brackets are used for insertions by the editor or transcriber. If the writer has omitted one curve of parentheses, it may be supplied in brackets, [)]. Usually square brackets in the original text can simply be changed to curves (. . .) without further annotation. See below for other uses of square brackets.

SMALL CAPITALS AND ITALICS. When words or phrases occur in the manuscript in small capitals, retain them in the transcription. If they are found frequently in the text, and have no apparent value for emphasis, the transcriber may decide to ignore them; this decision should be recorded as part of the project documentation. Comments or explanations by the transcriber (see below) are italicized within square brackets. However, missing letters or words, although enclosed in square brackets, are not italicized.

UNDERLINING. When the author has underlined words in the text for emphasis, this should be retained in the transcription. When entry dates, as in a diary, are underlined in the original, the underlining is generally not retained in the transcription. Superior letters in dates are not underlined; for example, 12th is transcribed as 12th.

PARAGRAPHS. Paragraphs may either be indented, or left flush with the left-hand margin with a blank line between them. Whichever convention is chosen should remain consistent throughout the transcription. In some instances, however, retaining variances in indentation may help convey the character of the original document.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

When transcribing manuscripts and diaries, the copyist should adhere as closely as possible to the original format, spelling, and overall presentation of the original, enclosing supplied information in square brackets. When transcribing a more formal document, such as a reminiscence, minor spelling and grammatical errors may be corrected without bracketing; if this practice is followed, the decision should be recorded as part of the project documentation.

On page 8 is an example of a transcription that illustrates many of these rules.

MISSPELLINGS. Sometimes a writer makes a mistake in spelling, and occasionally in grammar, that the reader might reasonably construe as the transcriber's error. Then [sic] is typed immediately after the word. But if the reader would not question the copyist's carefulness in transcription, mere misspellings are left without any such remark. In instances of a grossly misspelled word, the transcriber may choose to supply the correct word in brackets following the misspelled word: "qeshun [question]." However, if a manuscript is filled with misspellings, it is best to transcribe it just as is, reserving [sic] and corrections just for those cases in which the reader might become confused or suspect a transcriber error.

MUTILATED OR ILLEGIBLE MANUSCRIPTS. If a word or words can be guessed from the context, the expression is enclosed in square brackets. Thus: "it is en[evi]table that this will occur"; or "he [had] fallen." Uncertain but probable guesses are followed by a question mark, for example: "in the [Indi?]an wars." If no guess can be made, an appropriate remark may be supplied in this manner:

[*MS. burned*]

[*MS. blotted*]ke War

se[*MS. illegible*]ing ships

[*name illegible*]

In the afternoon I went [*MS. torn*] and helped with the threshing.

UNCERTAIN READINGS. If a reading is uncertain, a question mark enclosed in square brackets [?] is placed after every questionable word. Alternatively, and especially if the reading is very uncertain, the entire questionable word or phrase, with its question mark, may be enclosed in square brackets: “rendersveu [rendezvous?].” In general, it is better to hazard a guess than to use the [MS. illegible] convention, except in cases of unfamiliar proper names.

Comensed pedling[?] Bear[beer?] 5000 halefull[?]
shot 12bb guns as A signoril[?] it

OMISSIONS/INSERTIONS. Whenever possible, the transcriber should supply words, portions of words, or punctuation, the deliberate or careless omission of which by the author causes difficulty in reading. This is most commonly done where it seems useful to preserve the flow of the text as an aid to the reader. The supplied portions are enclosed in square brackets; they are not italicized.

I started [to] go home.
In New York C[urrenc]y the sum is 5 p[ounds] st[erlin]g.
geting to be clost qts[quarters] for us here
In the afternoon I went [to] the village.
In the afternoon I returned to C[onnor]’s house.

In some circumstances, the transcriber may choose to transcribe only certain portions of a document. Omissions by the transcriber are indicated by points. Three points are used for words or phrases within a sentence or at the beginning of a sentence. Four points are used for whole sentences; when the omission occurs at the end of a sentence; or when it begins in one sentence and ends in another. A space is left between each point.

I left New York . . . on February 15.

When one or more entire paragraphs are omitted, the omission is indicated by a line of points, using the same paragraph indentation (or absence thereof) as the rest of the document.

TRANSCRIBER’S COMMENTS.

Comments that relate directly to the text are inserted at the point where the comment is needed. They are enclosed in square brackets and italicized.

[written sideways in margin]: More Prisaners 425
[“1874” is written opposite this word in the margin]
See other examples under “Mutilated or Illegible Manuscripts,” above, and “Blanks in Text” and “Postscripts and Addresses,” below.

Comments that give additional about the document, the people or events discussed in it, or other supplementary information are placed in footnotes, referenced from the place in the document at which the comment is pertinent. Footnotes are not bracketed or italicized.

2. Although dated February 1874, internal evidence suggests that this letter was actually written in February 1875.

REPETITION OF WORDS. Inadvertent repetition of words by the author is indicated by [sic] following the extra word or words: “care must be taken in in [sic] this matter.” In old documents, the first word on a page is often repeated in the lower right-hand corner of the preceding page; in this case the word is not copied twice.

DATES centered in the manuscript are dropped to the beginning of the following paragraph.

RAISED LETTERS are represented in transcription by a superscript. If the transcriber chooses to fill in the remainder of the word, the raised letters are brought down to the line. For example, “Phil^a” would be “Phil[adelphi]a” if filled in.

BLANKS IN TEXT. If a space for a date, figure, or other data is left blank in the manuscript, the form [*blank in MS.*] is used.

Personally appeared before me this [*blank in MS.*] day of January. . .

WORDS CROSSED OUT. In manuscripts, words are often found crossed out by the author. In such cases, the text should be followed exactly. Use the font strikethrough option for every word or letter struck out by the author.

INITIALS should be filled out whenever the reader would be confused without the additional information. For example, if in a particular situation “R.R.” stands for “Red River” rather than the more expected “Railroad,” the correct rendering would be “R[ed] R[iver].” Note that the periods indicating the abbreviation are omitted in such cases.

SEALS. When a seal appears in a document, it should be indicated thus: (seal). When a representation of a seal is found on a copy of a document, it is indicated by: (seal mark).

HIS MARK. When a document is signed by an individual by his mark, the signature is copied thus:

his
François + Jaubidon
mark

PRINTED MATTER. When printed matter is found in a manuscript, it should be enclosed within angle brackets: <>. Conversely, a bit of handwriting in a typed manuscript is enclosed in angle brackets in reversed form: ><.

POSTSCRIPTS AND ADDRESSES. When transcribing portions of a manuscript other than the text itself, the copyist may employ the conventions given below. They are typed flush with the left-hand margin, enclosed in brackets, and italicized.

[*P.S.*] is the abbreviation for postscripts. After it are copied all remarks added after the document was signed, whether they are marked as postscripts or not. If the original writer included the abbreviation *P.S.*, then the brackets are omitted and the writer's style is followed exactly.

[*From:*] precedes, in the copy, any statement on the address sheet by the person who sent the letter.

[*Postmark:*]. The postmark on a letter or envelope is copied only when it gives a necessary clue to the date or otherwise adds to the reader's information.

[*Addressed:*] introduces the address on the letter's cover or envelope.

[*Endorsed:*]. Formerly the person who received a letter or document wrote on the back whatever information would tell him at a glance the author, date, and contents. Such information should be copied.

EXAMPLE
illustrating many of these rules

Extract from Albert Ely to Edmund F. Ely,
 October 5, [1847]¹
 [Ely Mss. – A.L.S.]

New Orleans, Oct. 5th [1847]

Dear brother:

I recieved [sic] your last letter yesterday, and am sorry to hear that the cop[p]er scheme is “exploded.” Now for another scheme. Would you emigrate to the so[uth] if any one would give you a good farm for so doing? I enclose the following for for [sic] your consideration: [*a newspaper clipping follows:*]

<A Fine Chance.--There is a Texas emigration and land company, who offer to give three hundred and twenty-five acres of land to families, and one hundred and sixty to single men over ~~seventeen~~ >twenty-one< years, conditioned that the family shall pay \$20, and the single man \$10, for surveying. . . .>

.....
 . . . According to John J. Smith of [*blank in MS.*], whose letter I enclose, the lands in Texas abound in game[?] and are rich in soil[.] the lands in question are somewhere between R[ed] R[iver] and the [*MS. illegible*], as you will see by the circular of the [Texas Emigrant] Company.

Truly your brother
 Albert

[*P.S.*] All well.

[*From:*] Albert W. Ely
 New Orleans, La.
 via Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

[*Postmark:*] New Orleans, La.
 Oct. 6 1847

[*Addressed:*] Hon. Edmund F. Ely
 La Point[e]
 Lake Superior

[*Endorsed:*] A. W. Ely
 Oct. 5, 1847
 Texas lands

¹ Enclosing John J. Smith to Albert Ely, September 25, 1847. Beginning with the words “According to John J. Smith,” the remainder of the letter is written across the preceding portion.