

Translation & Transcription Tools for Genealogy

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At some point in the research process, every genealogist needs to transcribe a document. At times, the document is a one-of-a-kind item that can be accessed only in-person at an archive or repository. In many other cases, a document has been scanned as an image, but has not been converted into usable text. Here is an overview of websites, apps, and software that can be leveraged to quickly and easily transcribe handwritten and difficult-to-read documents.

Translation Tools

Several tools, many for free, are available for family historians when translating documents in a foreign language. Most of these tools are not perfect and are no substitution for a reputable professional translation service by a native speaker.

- **Google Translate** can be accessed via web browser and mobile device app and translates text between 100 different languages. You can type text, copy and paste from a scanned document, and even speak text to be translated. Google Translate can also translate text on images.
- **iTranslate Voice** supports 42 different languages and is intended for real-time voice-to-voice translation as well as text translations.
- **Text Grabber** allows you to scan and translate any printed text from an image. Over 60 languages are recognized.

Social Media to the Rescue!

Consider joining a Facebook group focused on translating documents:

- **Genealogy Translations** is a Facebook group of genealogists who lend their foreign language skills to help translate documents.

Translation Tips and Tricks

- Create a **Hit List** of commonly used genealogy terms for a specific language such as Greek or German if that was the language of your ancestors. Consult the list when performing searches in record sets and in search engines.
- Create **Google Alerts** using specific words in your ancestor's native language including occupations and common genealogy terms. Example: **Henneberg witwe** would bring results for a *widow* in the Henneberg surname.
- Consider purchasing one of the low-cost text-to-speech / voice-to-voice translation apps such as **iTranslate Voice**. You can even save frequently used phrases in a "phrasebook."

Transcription Tools

A variety of tech tools is available when it comes to transcribing documents.

- **Transcript** bills itself as “a program designed to help you to transcribe the text on digital images of documents.” The program is free for personal use, but the pro version allows users access to special features including search and replace and image manipulation. Transcript utilizes a “split screen,” meaning the image being transcribed is open in the top window of the program while the window below displays typing as the document is transcribed.
- **GenScriber** is specifically geared towards genealogy research documents such as census population schedules and birth/marriage/death indices. Much like Transcript, it utilizes a split screen to view the document being transcribed as well as the ongoing transcription. The best feature of GenScriber is the ability to use a simple document format (for letters, diaries, and general text documents) or a spreadsheet format (for creating indices or transcribing indices).
- **Kindex** is a new web-based platform intended for building personal and family archives using scanned documents and photographs. Users upload scanned documents and can transcribe the text in a window to the right of the image. But Kindex takes transcription to a different level: users can “tag” people, places, and dates to create an overall archival index of items. Once items are transcribed and tagged, Kindex produces a PDF of the document transcription with a QR code at the top to access the original document image.
- **Dragon Naturally Speaking**, the voice-to-text software commonly known as Dragon, has improved in performance and is easy to use. Simply speak into a computer’s microphone and dictate what you see, even using commands such as “next line,” “backspace,” and more. **Dragon Mobile Assistant** is free and can be used on iOS and Android devices. This app is perfect for use at libraries and repositories while doing genealogy research or for dictating source citations.
- **Google Voice Typing** is one of the tools available in the popular office productivity suite, Google Drive, is the ability to transcribe voice to text. To access the feature, create a blank document in Google Drive, go to Tools, and select Voice Typing.

The challenge of old handwriting

In this digital age where most written communication is done with a keyboard, not only has writing by hand become a lost art, many fear that the ability to read cursive writing will also be lost. While genealogists may still be able to read their own handwriting, reading the handwriting of ancestors can be difficult. What may appear as indecipherable is due to viewing the handwriting through the modern eye. Tools are needed to help understand letters and diaries written prior to the twentieth century.

Researchers need skills in reviewing cursive writing and need to place the writing in context due to the use of slang, abbreviations, and spelling styles in use at the time. **GenealogyInTime Magazine** has compiled an extensive list of tools entitled “How to Read Old Handwriting” with tutorials to build skills for transcribing handwriting.

Transcription Projects

Looking to practice transcribing skills while at the same time giving back to the genealogy and archival records communities? Check out the **Transcribe | Citizen Archivist** page at the National Archives and Records Administration website. Set up an account and select a Transcription Mission. Missions include documents from the JFK assassination, records related to Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Cowen Report (eyewitness reports of anti-Jewish persecution in Russia during the early twentieth century). Volunteers can help complete transcription of records not finished by other participants.

Another interesting project is **Old Weather** on the Zooniverse web-platform. Volunteers work to transcribe historic ship logs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to build a database of historic weather facts and figures. Ship logs are handwritten and often contain stories about the voyage besides weather information.

Social Media to the Rescue!

The genealogy industry is not immune to crowd-sourcing platforms and projects, especially when it comes to learning new skills and deciphering documents.

- Any genealogist researching German handwriting understands its special challenges. The **German Genealogy Records Transcription Group** on Facebook allows members to ask for assistance in deciphering handwritten German language records.

Transcription Tricks and Tips

- **Include everything!** The goals of genealogists include documenting facts as they are found; interpretation of facts should not be part of the transcribing task. Even if information seems incorrect, transcribe it “as is.”
- **Consider the formatting.** Some transcribers format the text in the same manner as the document including line endings and page length.
- **Use brackets for notations.** Use “[sic]” to point out an error or a brief note for interpretation purposes in brackets. Do not include lengthy notes in the text; use footnotes if needed.
- **Display missing letters and words.** If a specific letter or word is illegible, use a blank underline in brackets [_____].
- **Create a negative image for hard to read documents.** When working with digital images that are difficult to read, create a negative image so black text on a white background will appear as white text on a black background. Use photo-editing software to manipulate the contrast and brightness features.

- **Use Wolfram|Alpha to help decipher missing letters.** Wolfram Alpha can help determine missing letters in a word. This function is currently limited to the English language. Type the word with blanks and letters such as “h__w_y” in the search field and hit Enter. Wolfram|Alpha will return a list of possible words.
- **Use dictation software.** A low-cost or free solution easy on the hands in terms of typing is the use of programs such as Dragon Naturally Speaking or Voice Typing in Google Drive.
- **Donate transcription to original repository.** Most repositories appreciate receiving the digital transcription of any document a researcher has taken the time to transcribe. This is a low-cost way to give back to these organizations.

Resources

- **Citizen Archivist (NARA)**
<https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/transcribe/citizen-archivist/transcribe/tips>
- **Dragon Mobile Assistant**
<http://www.nuance.com/for-individuals/mobile-applications/index.htm>
- **Dragon Naturally Speaking**
<http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm>
- **Genealogy Translations (Facebook)**
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/genealogytranslation/>
- **GenScriber**
<http://genscriber.com/>
- **German Genealogy Records Transcription Group (Facebook)**
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1454015278205406/>
- **Google Alerts**
<https://www.google.com/alerts>
- **Google Translate**
<https://translate.google.com/>
- **Google Voice Typing**
<https://drive.google.com/>
- **How to Read Old Handwriting**
<http://www.genealogyintime.com/GenealogyResources/Articles/how-to-read-old-handwriting-page1.html>
- **iTranslate Voice**
<http://itranslatevoice.com/index.html>
- **Kindex**
<https://app.kindex.org/>
- **Old Weather**
<https://www.oldweather.org/>
- **Textgrabber**
<https://www.abbyy.com/products/mobile/text-grabber/en/>
- **Transcribe | Citizen Archivist (NARA)**
<https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/transcribe>
- **Transcript**
<https://www.jacobboerema.nl/en/Freeware.htm>
- **Wolfram|Alpha**
<https://wolframalpha.com>