

The ABCs of the Old German Script

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Background Overview of the Old German Script

The old German script (*deutsche Schrift*), also known as **Kurrent**, is a **cursive script**. Although some of the letters are similar to those in the Latin/Roman script we use today, others are quite different. Kurrent was used in German records for hundreds of years.




A more recent, angular type of Kurrent known as Sütterlin was introduced in German schools in 1914, adopted by all of Prussia in 1924, and taught in all of Germany 1934–1941. In 1941, the *deutsche Schrift* (both the earlier versions and Sütterlin) was decreed to be replaced by the Latin handwriting. The German script has thus not been taught in German schools since the early 1940s.

Similar Lowercase Letters

Learning to write the old German script will help you learn to read it. One approach to learning the German script is by grouping similar letters together:









Ascenders only

The following letters contain only ascenders; if you see a lowercase letter with only an ascender, it is almost certainly one of the following:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|---|------------|---|
| ▪ b |  | ▪ k |  | ▪ t |  |
| ▪ d |  | ▪ l |  | ▪ ending s |  |





Descenders only

The following letters contain only descenders; if you see a lowercase letter with only a descender, it is almost certainly one of the following:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|---|------------|---|
| ▪ g |  | ▪ q |  | ▪ z |  |
| ▪ j |  | ▪ x |  | ▪ middle s |  |
| ▪ p |  | ▪ y |  | | |

Ascenders and descenders

The following letters contain both ascenders and descenders; if you see a lowercase letter with both an ascender and a descender, it is almost certainly one of the following:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|---|------------|---|--|----------------------------|
| ▪ f |  | ▪ middle s |  | | |
| ▪ h |  | ▪ ß |  | | (Eszett; often written ss) |

No ascenders nor descenders

The following letters contain neither ascenders nor descenders; if you see a lowercase letter with neither an ascender nor a descender, it is almost certainly one of the following (grouped in more similar-letter groups below):

a/o		c/i		u/n/e/m		r/v/w	
▪ a	<i>α</i>	▪ c	<i>τ</i>	▪ ü	<i>ü</i>	▪ r	<i>ʀ</i>
▪ ä	<i>ǎ</i>	▪ i	<i>ı</i>	▪ u	<i>ü</i>	▪ v	<i>ʋ</i>
▪ o	<i>ο</i>			▪ n	<i>η</i>	▪ w	<i>ʋ</i>
▪ ö	<i>ö</i>			▪ e	<i>ε</i>		
				▪ m	<i>η</i>		

Umlauted letters

The following letters contain umlauts, which may also be spelled out as *ae*, *oe*, and *ue*, respectively; if you see an umlauted letter, it is one of the following:

- ä *ǎ*
- ö *ö*
- ü *ü*
- Note: The letter written as *y* in German records is not an umlauted letter, but rather the letter *y* with a dieresis to distinguish it from *p*

Additional Diacritics

Some letters may have certain additions.

- The letters *n* and *m* may be doubled by adding a horizontal line over the letter.
- The letter *u* is usually marked with a u hook (a hook, wavy line, or almost circle) over the letter to distinguish it from *n*. The letters *n* and *e* also look extremely similar, but *n* is generally wider than *e*. In the case of *n* and *e*, consider whether the word seems to call for a vowel or a consonant.
- The letter *y* is often written with a dieresis over it (two dots, identical to an umlaut). This is simply to indicate it is *y* rather than the similar-looking *p* and is not part of the letter, just like the u hook is not part of the letter *u*.
- The letter *c* is written like an *i* without the dot, sometimes with the addition of a small hat or tick symbol at the top. This consonant is rarely found by itself in German (it is usually seen in the combinations *sch*, *ch*, and *ck*).

The S's

The letter *s* may be written in multiple ways, depending on its placement.

- capital S (nouns are capitalized) *Œ*
- initial/long s *ſ*
- Eszett (ß; only at the end of a syllable) *ß*
- double ss *ſſ*
- ending/round s (only at the end of a syllable) *ſ*

Common Letter Combinations

The following combinations are common in German:

- sch (this combination is so common, names beginning with *sch* are sometimes listed separately from all those beginning with *s*, both in Viennese library card catalogs and in handwritten name indexes)
- St (this combination is easily mistaken for N)
- ss
- ff
- ch
- ck

Uppercase Letters

A capital letter can be a bit of a wildcard. The capitals are shown below, but many variants are found in records. Names, places, and nouns should be (and usually are) capitalized in German.



If a capital letter cannot be deciphered initially, decipher the rest of the word first and then determine the capital letter based on context. Alternatively, find the letter at the beginning of a word or name you do recognize in the document.

General Tips & Format

Names, dates, places, and numbers are often written in the Latin script, with the rest of the text in the old German script. If this is the case in your record, browsing for a specific surname or date is simpler because you can just look for text in the Latin script. Note that if you see what looks like a lowercase *h* from the German script (with a loop for an ascender and a loop for a descender), check which script the surrounding word is in; if it is in the Latin script, it is almost certainly a *long s* (an archaic form of *s*), not a German *h*.

Watch out for spelling variations. Spelling was not standardized until the late 1800s, so words (including names and placenames) are spelled in many ways. Think about how a word sounds, not how it is officially spelled today. For an in-depth explanation of German spelling variations, see germanologyunlocked.com/think-like-german-spelling-variations-genealogy-documents and Roger P. Minert's *Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics*.

Familiarize yourself with key terms. Refer to the German Genealogical Word List (familysearch.org/wiki/en/German_Genealogical_Word_List), especially its "Key Words" table. To search the page, hit CTRL and F on your keyboard, and then type part of a word in the search bar; use the up-and-down arrows next to the search bar to view the results.

Consider what information you expect to see, and where. Look at column headings, if any. A man's occupation is often listed right before or after his name. The word *geb.* (*geboren*, meaning "born") often introduces a maiden name, although it may introduce birth information (such as a date or location). *Aus* and *von* (from) introduce a place.

The following pieces of information are often found in the record types below:

- **Birth** records: child's name, birth date, parents' names, legitimacy
- **Baptism** records: birth information + baptism date, godparents
- **Marriage** records: bride and groom's names, ages/birth dates, marital status, marriage date, parents' names
- **Death** records: name of the deceased, death date, age, cause of death
- **Burial** records: death information + burial date

Church records may also list the priest's name, and civil records list the name of the civil official and the informant. For more detailed lists of information likely included, see [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany Church Records](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Church_Records) ("Information Recorded in Church Records" section) and [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany Civil Registration](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Civil_Registration)

Resources

For additional help learning the old German script, see the following resources:

- [German Paleography Seminar](#) in the FamilySearch Learning Center
- [Old German Script](#) series in the FamilySearch Learning Center
- [Germany Handwriting](#) page in the FamilySearch Wiki
- Examples of each letter: suetterlinschrift.de/Lese/Kanzlei1.htm
- Animations of each letter being written: [script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/alphabet-description\(english\)](http://script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/alphabet-description(english))
- Examples of records in the old German script: intrenches.com/wwii-german-handwriting and typography.guru/journal/kurrent%E2%80%9494500-years-of-german-handwriting-r38
- Katherine Schober's *Tips and Tricks of Deciphering German Handwriting: A Translator's Tricks of the Trade for Transcribing German Genealogy Documents*
- Ernest Thode's *German-English Genealogical Dictionary*
- Roger P. Minert's *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents*
- Alphabet charts and practice: [script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/ge-alphabet-full-chart\(english\)](http://script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/ge-alphabet-full-chart(english))
- Tips for reading: archivfuehrer-kolonialzeit.de/index.php/schrift?sf_culture=en
- Overview of letters with ascenders/descenders: lovablehistory.com/sample-sheets
- Longer, in-depth guide to the old German script: kurrent-lernen-muecke.de/pdf/Schreiblehrgang%20Kurrentschrift%20%202016-english.pdf
- Get help with deciphering German script in the Germany Research Community group: community.familysearch.org/en/group/88-germany-genealogy-research
- Download free Kurrent fonts, such as Otilie (1001freefonts.com/ottilie.font which does not include middle s) and Wiegel Kurrent (1001freefonts.com/wiegel-kurrent.font which does not include ending s)
- Check your transcription by typing a text to see it in various old German script styles: deutsche-handschrift.de/adsschreiben.php

Practice Sheets

See these [linked practice sheets](#) containing uppercase and lowercase letters, or print multiples of the following blank sheet to practice on:

A blank sheet of handwriting practice paper with ten sets of horizontal lines. Each set consists of a solid top line, a dashed midline, and a solid bottom line, providing a guide for letter height and placement.