

Reading Russian Documents: Deciphering the Handwriting and Understanding the Grammar

Russia “How to” Guide, Beginner Level: Instruction

October 2019

GOAL

This guide will teach you:

- tips and tricks to decipher Russian handwriting.
- how to utilize genealogical word list and online dictionaries to assist in translation.
- the basic grammar necessary to read and understand genealogical documents.

INTRODUCTION

You may want to consult the following “How to” Guides before continuing:

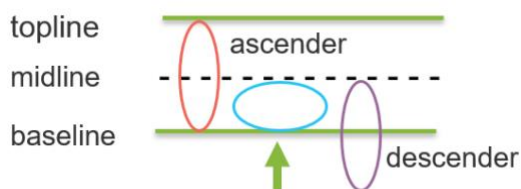
- [The Russian Alphabet](#)

HOW TO

Handwritten Russian records can often be difficult to read. Many letters look similar and are difficult to differentiate. The following are some tips and tricks that can be used to decipher the handwriting and determine the identity of letters.

1. Look for Ascenders and Descenders

Letters can be categorized into three groups: ascenders, descenders, and centers. Ascenders are letters that extend above the midline, while descenders reach below the baseline. Center letters are contained between the midline and baseline.



This can be used as a tool to decipher handwritten records. The following are ascenders and descenders:

Ascenders Descenders

б б

в в

д д

д д т т

з з у у

р р ф ф

первого

р р

в в

Identify the ascenders and descenders in a document to narrow to help you further identify the identity of a letter.

2. Look for Hooks

Some handwritten letters begin or end with hooks as pictured to the right. Learning to recognize these hooks can help you determine which letters are which.

Hooks Before	Hooks After
л	щ
м	ц
я	

л л ш ш м м ц ц я я

3. Separate the Letters

в л а д и м и р
Владимир

Printing out your document and using a pen or pencil to separate the individual letters may be useful. Use ascenders, descenders and hooks as place markers as shown in the example to the left.

4. Look for Lines Above and Below Letters

Lines below and above letters can help identify letters.

Ш Ш

т т

п

5. Trace the Letters or Write it out Yourself

You may find it useful to trace the word itself using your finger or a pen/pencil.

6. Alternative Ideas:

- a. Look at the whole page – letters or words may have been repeated.
- b. Analyze the record keeper's handwriting – look for patterns or styles.
- c. Use context to help with words that may be unclear.

Translation: A Three Step Process:

1. Transcribe the word.
 - Use the tips and tricks mentioned above as well as the handout from the previous lesson to help you recognize letters.
2. Type the word in Cyrillic letters.
 - Use an online keyboard such as the phonetic Russian keyboard available through typeit.org to type the word in Cyrillic letters.
3. Use the genealogical word list, online translators or dictionaries to search for the word.
 - Copy and paste the word you have just typed in Cyrillic letters and search for it in the Russian Genealogical Word List, online translator or a dictionary to determine its meaning. Learn about these important tools by reading below:

The Russian Genealogical Word List:

The [Russian Genealogical Word List](#), available through the FamilySearch Wiki, is an excellent tool in your research.¹ This list contains words commonly found in genealogical records. The list is organized alphabetically (according to the Russian alphabet), but also contains sections on word groupings such as months of the year and numbers. The word list can be searched using the Ctrl-F feature. On a webpage, pressing the keys *Ctrl* and *F* (or *Command* and *F* for Mac users) at the same time will bring up a search box. Type what you are looking for in the search box and it will locate the text on the page. Keep in mind that this list is not comprehensive.

Online Translators and Dictionaries:

The following links are great resources to assist you in your translations:

- translate.google.com
- dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-russian/
- gramota.ru/slovari/info/
- ru.wiktionary.org

To find items that may not be in a dictionary or word list (given and surnames, place names, etc.) use the links found under the heading: *Names and Places* on the [Russian Genealogical Word List](#) page on the FamilySearch Wiki.

¹ "Russian Genealogical Word List," FamilySearch Wiki (<http://www.familysearch.org/wiki>).

Basic Grammar for Reading and Understanding Genealogical Records

It is important to have a basic understanding of Russian grammar in order to read genealogical documents. Russian uses cases, or endings based upon the usage in the sentence. To read a more in-depth discussion of Russian grammar and grammatical case endings, read the article [Russian Grammar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_grammar).²

The charts below illustrate the possible case endings for both nouns and adjectives. It is important to note that adjectival endings are not just for traditional adjectives. You may find surnames or locations that use adjectival endings. For example, the surname **Достоевский** (Dostoevsky) or **Самарская** губерния (Samaritan gubernia/province).

NOUNS (endings)	Nominative (base/dictionary form)	Genitive (after из, от, son/daughter of, of the X family)	Prepositional (location after в(о))	Instrumental (after между or с)
Masculine	∅ (ends in a consonant) -й -ь	-а(-я)	-е -ий	-ом (-ём/-ем)
Feminine	-а(-я) -ь	-ы (-и)	-е -ии -и	-ой (-ёй/-ей) -ью
Neuter	-о (-ё/-е)	-а(-я)	-е -ий	-ом (-ём/-ем)
Plural	M/F -ы (-и) N -а(-я)	-ов (-ёв/-ев) -ей -ий ∅ (sometimes fleeting vowel)	-ах (-ях)	-ами (-ями)

² "Russian Grammar," *Wikipedia* (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_grammar).

ADJECTIVES (endings)	Nominative (base/dictionary form)	Genitive (after из, от, son/daughter of, of the X family)	Prepositional (location after в(о))	Instrumental (after между or с)
Masculine	-ый/ий -ой	-ого/ого	-ом	-ым
Feminine	-ая	-ой	-ой	-ой
Neuter	-ое	-ого	-ом	-ым
Plural	-ые	-ых	-ых	-ими

* The genitive “-aro” ending is not typically used in modern Russian; however, it is often found in genealogical documents.

The following charts are examples of real words in different cases.

NOUNS (examples)	Nominative (base/dictionary form)	Genitive (after из, от, son/daughter of, of the X family)	Prepositional (location after в(о))	Instrumental (after между or с)
Masculine	муж (∅) Анатолий январь	мужа Анатолия января	муже Анатолии январе	мужом Анатолием январем
Feminine	жена армия любовь	жены армии любви	жене армии любви	женой армией любвью
Neuter	детство имение	детства имения	детстве имении	детством имением
Plural	земледельцы девушки лица армии мужья	земледельцев девушек (∅) лиц (∅) армий мужей	земледельцах девушак лицак армиях мужьях	земледельцами девушками лицами армиями мужьями

ADJECTIVES (endings)	Nominative (base/dictionary form)	Genitive (after из, от, son/daughter of, of the X family)	Prepositional (location after в(о))	Instrumental (after между or с)
Masculine	Достоевск ий Толст ой	Достоевск ого Толст ого	Достоевск ом Толст ом	Достоевск ым Толст ым
Feminine	Достоевск ая Толст ая	Достоевск ой Толст ой	Достоевск ой Толст ой	Достоевск ой Толст ой
Neuter	Достоевск ое Толст ое	Достоевск ого Толст ого	Достоевск ом Толст ом	Достоевск ым Толст ым
Plural	Достоевск ые Толст ые	Достоевск ых Толст ых	Достоевск ых Толст ых	Достоевск ыми Толст ыми

Verb Conjugation

In Russian, verbs are conjugated depending upon who is doing the action. Verbs in past tense vary according to the gender of the one doing the action. To learn more about Russian verb conjugation, read the *Verbs* section of the article [Russian Grammar](#).³

The verb родить (to be born) has been conjugated in past tense below. The table illustrates the case endings for various genders.

Male: родился
Female: родилась
Plural: родились

Male	Female	Plural
-Ø(ся)	-а(сь)	-и(сь)

HOW TO

Now, test your skills you have learned in this “How to” Guide. The Activity is a way to check your knowledge and let you know you’ve mastered the Guide! Click [here](#) to try out the Activity.

³ “Russian Grammar,” *Wikipedia* (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_grammar).