Handwriting Guide: German Gothic

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PURPOSE

Reading old German records requires a knowledge of basic German genealogical terms and familiarity with German handwriting. Difficulty in reading a record may not result from a record keeper's poor penmanship but rather the use of a different style of handwriting. As most early German documents were written in some form of Gothic handwriting or printing, familiarity with this style of writing will aid in deciphering early German records. This guide introduces common Gothic letters, type, and handwriting used in German records.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Two major styles of writing emerged in Europe: *Gothic,* which has been used since the ninth century, and *Roman,* also known as *Antigua* or *Latin.* Roman eventually became the standard throughout most of western Europe, Canada, and the United States, but the Gothic style prevailed in Germany until 1941, in the Czech Republic through the 1700s, and in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries through the nineteenth century.

You may find Gothic or Latin handwriting styles used alone or together in the same German record. For example, names and headings may be written in one style and the text of the document in another.

The chart included with this guide lists both the standard printed and handwritten Gothic forms of the German alphabet and their Roman counterparts. Since handwriting varies from person to person, the handwriting in your record may vary from the forms shown on the chart.

You may also find variations of Gothic script. In various regions of the German Empire, slight variations of Gothic handwriting and type developed. Variants included "Schwabacher" and the more formal "German Fraktur."

When printing by moveable type was invented, typefaces were based on the handwriting styles of the time. Two major styles emerged corresponding to the two handwriting styles: Gothic, with pointed, heavy-bodied letters, and Roman, with lighter, more simple letters.

GERMAN ALPHABET

German has all 26 letters used in the English alphabet, plus a few additional letters: umlauted vowels—ä, ö, and ü—and an *Eszett*, ß. Specific information about these additional letters is given later.

There is often no distinction made between the capital *I* (ℑ) and the capital *J* (ℑ). They may be represented by the same letter whether printed or handwritten and may be also indexed as the same letter. When followed by a vowel the letter is a consonant, *J* and when followed by a consonant, it is a vowel, *I*. For example:

ℑuli (Juli) = July
der ℑunge (der Junge) = boy
die ℑdee (die Idee) = the idea
die ℑnfel (die Insel = the island)

PRINTED GOTHIC

Books or forms published with Gothic typeset can be difficult for someone to read. Some of the Gothic letters are similar to Roman style print, but others are quite different. The following letters will probably seem unfamiliar at first: ҟ (k) , ҳ (x), Ҩ (G), Ҕ (H), Ҩ (S), ҕ (ß), and Ҭ (T). In addition, as several of the letters are very similar, you will also need to pay particular attention to the small distinguishing characteristics to be able to read typed Gothic. These include the letters:

Ҟ and Ҳ (A and U),	ſ and f (s and f)
Ҧ, Ҧ, and ҕ (B, V, and ß)	b and v (b and v)
Ҟ and Ҩ (C and E)	f and t (k and t)
Ҩ and Ҩ (G and S)	n and u (n and u)
Ҟ and Ҏ (K and R)	r and ҳ (r and x)
Ҏ and Ҏ (N and R)	v and ŋ (v and y)

There are some tricks that will help you recognize Gothic letters. Note which letters extend below the line of writing and which extend above. Some letters extend both above and below. Some letters extend neither above nor below, such as the letter *a*.

Gothic print also has *ligatures* (multiple letters printed as one letter) and *diacritics* (accent notations added to a letter) not found in English. In German certain consonant combinations are common. The early designers of Gothic type used one type piece to print both consonants. The most common ligatures are:

ck - ck   ch - ch   ꝛ, ꝛ - sz
tz - tz   ſſ, ß - ss

The *Umlaut* (sound shift) is commonly used with three vowels: *a, o,* and *u*. It appears as two dots placed over the vowel and indicates a change in the sound of the vowel. These sound shifts are often written without the diacritic marks:

Ä ä	=	Ae ae	=	Ꚛ ä	=	Ꚛe ꙏ
Ö ö	=	Oe oe	=	Ö ö	=	Oe œ
Ü ü	=	Ue ue	=	Ü ü	=	Ue ue

Occasionally two dots were also used over the *y* (ÿ, ÿ) and over an *e* as in *Noël* (Noël) and *Michaël* (Michaël). In these instances, there is no change in pronunciation of the letter beneath. The dots over the *y* are carried over from Latin when the double *i* at the end of a word was written, '*ÿ*'. (Latin did not have the letter *j* or *y*). The dots over the *e* indicate that the *e* is pronounced with its own value (it is not part of an umlaut).

Another marking found over letters is the *U-bogen*, or u-hook. This was a marking like a curved dash placed over a *u* to distinguish it from an *n*. This is not to be confused with a straight line placed over an *m* or *n* which was used as a shorthand abbreviation for a double letter or leaving out additional letters, as in *Johañ* for Johann or *Jōes* for Joannes (Latin form of Johannes).

German has an additional letter not found in English, called an *Eszett* (ß). It looks like a Roman script capital *B* with a tail on top (ß). It is pronounced and sometimes rewritten as a double *ss*. It is never found at the beginning of a word.

HANDWRITTEN GOTHIC

With handwritten documents, it is not always easy to tell where one letter ends and the next one begins. Many of the letters also have similar shapes making it difficult to tell one letter from another. Practice writing your name and other words in the Gothic alphabet until you can develop a feel for the flow of the letters. This will help you read documents more easily.

When reading German records, you may experience three common problems:

• Gothic letters may look like those you are used to in Roman script, and you will think they are the Roman letters. For example, the *v* may resemble a *w* and a *w* might resemble an *m*.

• Some Gothic letters may look like other Gothic letters. For example, the following letters may appear very similar to each other in Gothic script and must be carefully distinguished:

    e, n, u   g, p, q
    s, h, f, j   B, C, L
    r, v

• Some Gothic letters may be entirely new to you. For example, the Gothic lowercase letters *e, h,* and *s* and the Gothic capital letters *B, C, H,* and *S* are quite different from the Roman letters.

With practice you will learn to recognize Gothic letters. By studying particular letters, you will be able to read the Gothic handwriting much more accurately. Learning key German genealogical terms will also help.

When a letter cannot be identified in a document, look for the same letter or word in another part of the document. It may be clearer, or the context may make it easier to figure out. Also look for an index. Indexes to German records were often made much later than the original documents and may include the names in a style of handwriting which is easier to read.

Since every individual's handwriting is distinct, you may wish to prepare a handwriting chart with the alphabet for the particular style used by the scribe who wrote the records you are researching. In particular, note letters that are different than those you are used to.

HOW TO USE THE CHART FOR GERMAN RESEARCH

The following chart shows Roman letters with typed and handwritten German Gothic equivalents. To learn this style, practice writing it. This will help you develop a feel for the way letters are written and distinguish the letters when they are written differently.

Old German Type and Handwriting

Roman Type	German Type	German Script		Roman Type	German Type	German Script
Aa	𝔄a			Vv	𝔙v	
Bb	𝔅b			Ww	𝔚w	
Cc	ℭc			Xx	𝔛x	
Dd	𝔇d			Yy	𝔜y	
Ee	𝔈e			Zz	ℨ	
Ff	𝔉f					
Gg	𝔊g			**Modified Vowels (Umlaute)**		
Hh	ℌh			Ää	𝔄̈ ä	
Ii	ℑi			Öö	𝔒̈ ö	
Jj	𝔍j			Üü	𝔘̈ ü	
Kk	𝔎k					
Ll	𝔏l			**Compound Consonants**		
Mm	𝔐m			ch	ch	
Nn	𝔑n			sch	sch	
Oo	𝔒o			ck	ck	
Pp	𝔓p			ss	ſſ	
Qq	𝔔q			ß (SZ, SS)	ß (ß ſſ)	
Rr	ℜr			st	ſt	
Ss	𝔖ſ			tz	tz	
Tt	𝔗t			ph	ph	
Uu	𝔘u					

SUGGESTED READING

Dozens of guides and handbooks have been written to assist people in reading German Gothic script. Studying these books will help you to see variations of the script. Most guides for genealogists include examples of names, occupations, and genealogical terms showing how they look in both Roman and Gothic handwriting.

The following is an excellent introductory guide to reading names and genealogical records. It was produced to help people who are unfamiliar with Gothic script:

German Records Extraction—Script Exercises. Salt Lake City, Utah: Family History Library, 1980. (FHL book 943 D27gs; film 1224522 item 1.)

Other helpful guides include the following:

Bentz, Edna M. *If I Can, You Can: Deciphering Germanic Records.* San Diego, Calif.: Edna M. Bentz, 1982. (FHL book 943 G3b; computer number 0170537.)

Mashey, Anne B. *A Guide to Olde German Handwriting of the Mid-1800s for Genealogists, Researchers, Antiquers.* Wexford, Pa.: Anne B. Mashey, 1982. (FHL book 943 G37n no.2; computer number 0205085.)

Storrer, Norman J., and Larry O. Jensen. *A Genealogical and Demographic Handbook of German Handwriting, 17th–19th Centuries*. Pleasant Grove, Utah: Norman J. Storrer, 1977. (FHL book 943 G3sj; computer number 0246694.)

Verdenhalven, Fritz. *Die deutsche Schrift—The German Script: Ein Übungsbuch* [an exercise book]. Neustadt an der Aisch: Verlag Degener & Co., 1991. (FHL book 943 G37v; computer number 0651425.)

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

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