Transcription conventions

A first transcription of any document should be, as far as possible, a direct letter by letter transcription retaining original forms of spelling, punctuation and layout. When editing documents for publication it is usual to modify the draft transcription to make it more readily understood by the reader. However it is important to note what modifications have been made, and what conventions have been used.

So at first transcribe line by line and letter by letter, retaining forms of i j u and v, punctuation and capitalisation as they appear in the document.

Expand abbreviations using square brackets [ ]. These should also be used for any other supplied text such as queries [?], illegible letters or words (represented by full stops) [...] and comments such as [page torn] [blot] [blank] etc.

Abbreviations of uncertain significance should be represented by an apostrophe.

Deletions, if legible, should appear within diamond brackets < >.

Words (or letters) omitted and found in the margin or interlined should be placed within sloping lines \ / in their correct position in the text.

It is necessary to transcribe accurately and that means that nothing is to be added or left out, without some indication as above. Any peculiarity of the document should be commented upon in note form so that the transcription may be clearly understood.

If you go through a document letter by letter leaving blanks for those you cannot work out, by the time that you reach the end you will often be able to return to the beginning and fill in many, if not all, of the blanks. Beware of the old letterforms that look like entirely different modern letters. For example a Secretary Hand e looks like a modern o, c like an r, and r like a w. Patience and perseverance are the watchwords when reading old records.

Remember that there was no accepted form of spelling, especially of names of persons and places, and even commonly used words can be spelt in two or three different ways within one document. Spelling is often phonetic and thus influenced by the local dialect and accent of the informant and/or the recorder (particularly if different!) and whether one or the other had a cold or was deaf. Capital letters are used within a sentence, and punctuation is often non-existent or at the least unsystematic.

Latin was used for all official records until 1733, with the exception of the Commonwealth period (1651-1660). Some parish registers still use Latin after 1733, but most are in English before 1733. But the documents often use a great deal of common form, so later English documents give the key to earlier ones in Latin. This common form can also be useful in identifying the type of document, for example most wills (except nuncupative ones) begin "In the name of God Amen".