

Abstracting Documents: An Essential Skill for All Genealogists

Julie Miller, CG®, CGLSM, FNGS
Broomfield, Colorado
julie@jpmresearch.com

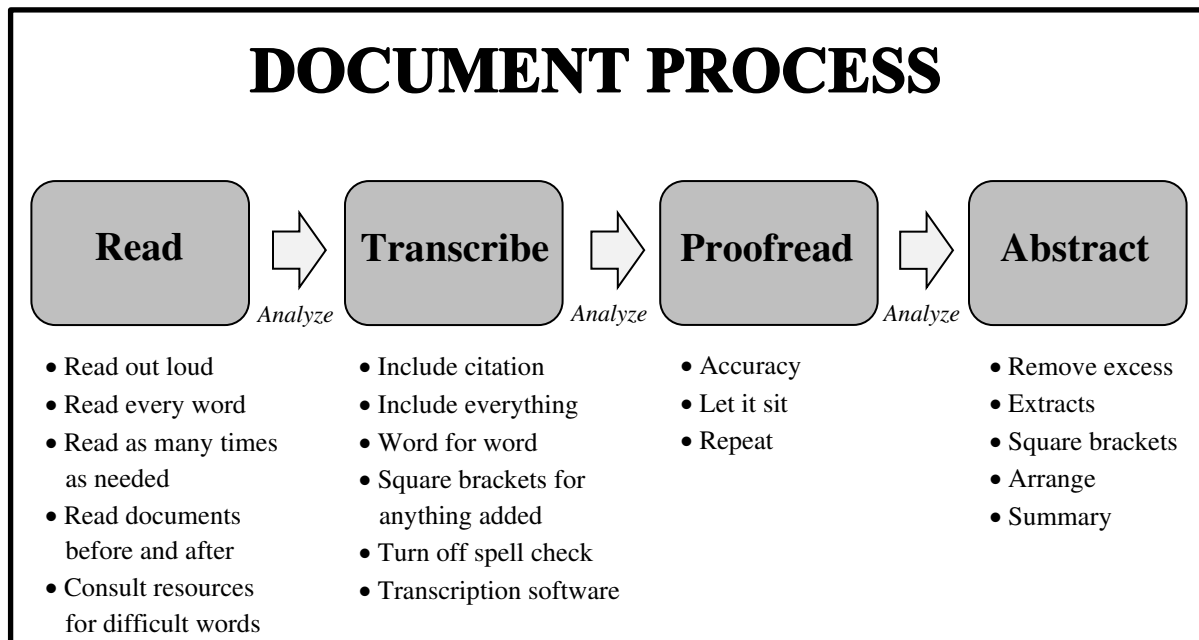
Introduction

Every document that is used during genealogical research must be thoroughly and accurately analyzed. Abstracting is a fundamental part of this research and analyzing process. Yet many genealogists are not confident in their ability to perform this task effectively and efficiently. This causes researchers to avoid the abstracting process resulting in research errors.

Transcription is a word for word copy of a document with all spelling, grammar, and punctuation copied exactly as found.¹

Extract is a word for word copy of a selected portion of a piece of writing.¹

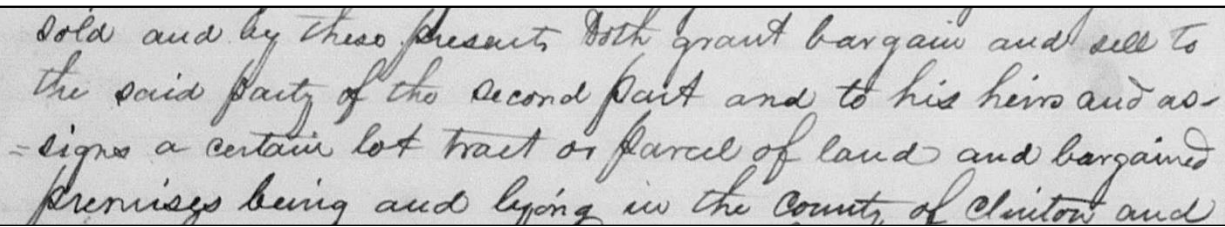
Abstract is a summary that records all the important detail from a document.¹



1. Mary McCampbell Bell, "Transcripts and Abstracts," Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor, *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001), Chap. 16, pp. 291–326.

Boilerplate

Standard fixed legal language that is found in specific types of documents (deeds, wills, etc.)



Sold and by these presents doth grant bargain and sell to the said party of the second part and to his heirs and assigns a certain lot tract or parcel of land and bargained premises being and lying in the County of Clinton and

“Doth grant bargain and sell to the said party of the second part and to his heirs and assigns a certain lot tract or parcel of land and bargained premises...”

Clinton Co., Missouri, deed book B: 102-104, Thomas Potete to Martin Lorsin, deed, 12 November 1839, Recorder of Deeds, Plattsburg; FHL microfilm 1,005,935



TIP Keep a list of boilerplate words and phrases for each type of document.



TIP Save transcription file.
Make another working copy, rename and save it.
Use this copy to strike-out excess verbiage.
Double space the working copy.

Software for Transcribing

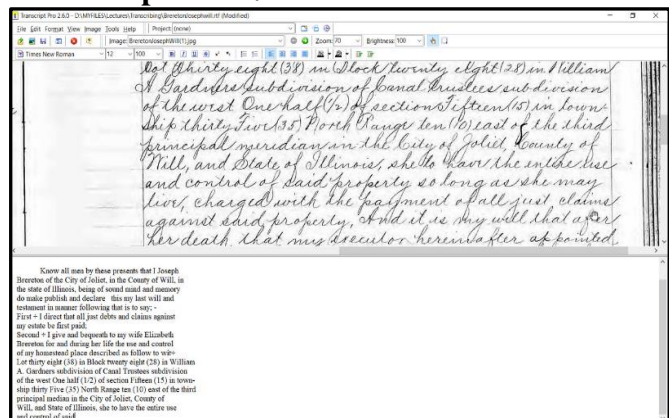
Word Processor

Transcript—www.jacobboerema.nl/en

GenScriber—<https://genscriber.com/en>

Transcript

www.jacobboerema.nl/en



Abstracting Steps

1. Transcribe the document.
2. Remove excess verbiage, examine what is left, then proofread to check that all important information remains.
3. Arrange the information.

General Items to include in an abstract:

- Identify people involved
- Document type
- Document date
- Location
- Source
- Summary
- Witnesses
- Signature or Mark
- Recording
- Appendages

Specific Items to Include in a Deed Abstract:

- Grantor and Grantee Names
- Residence of Grantor and Grantee
- Payment Amount and Terms
- Legal Land Description
- Other Names Mentioned in Deed
- Dower

Specific Items to Include in a Will Abstract:

- Testator's name
- Testator's residence and any personal information
- Other persons mentioned in will
- Persons receiving a legacy, description of legacy and any conditions
- Executors
- Witnesses
- Dates signed and proved



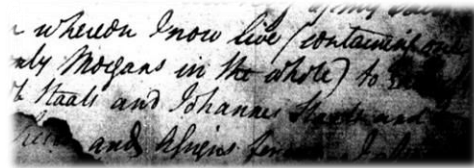
Abstract as soon as possible
after transcribing and proofing.



Save document, transcription
and abstract together.

Common Document Problems

- Faded ink
- Missing portions
- Bleeding ink
- Unfamiliar writing style
- Inkblots
- Obsolete letter forms
- Stains
- Poor penmanship
- Ripped paper
- Tight binding
- Worn edges
- Outdated terms



Abstracting a document is simply learning to differentiate between a document's crucial details and its unnecessary verbiage. It is a skill that all genealogists should be proficient in to conduct sound genealogical research.

Practice is Key
to Success

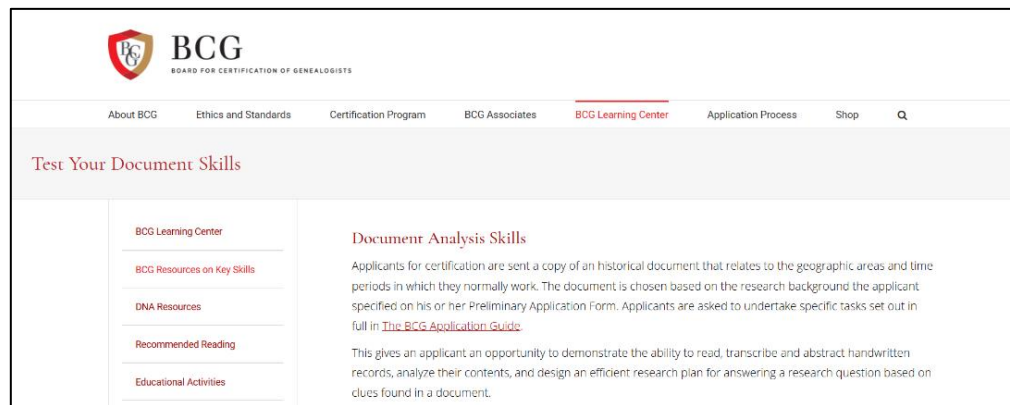


Further Study and Resources



National Genealogical Society Continuing Genealogical Studies Course: Transcribing, Extracting, and Abstracting Genealogical Records.
www.ngsgenealogy.org/cgs/transcribing-extracting-and-abstracting-genealogical-documents/.

National Genealogical Society Continuing Genealogical Studies Course: Reading Old Handwriting. <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cgs/reading-old-handwriting/>.



“Document Analysis Skills.” *Board for Certification of Genealogists*.
<http://bcgcertification.org/learning/skills/skilltest>. There are three examples of documents with the transcription and abstract.

Bell, Mary McCampbell. “Transcripts and Abstracts.” Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor.
Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001. Chap. 16, pp. 291–326.

Black, Henry Campbell. *Black’s Law Dictionary*. Revised Fourth Edition. St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1968.

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, Second Edition Revised. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2021. Chap. 3, p. 18–19.
- Boerema, Jacob. Transcript. Genealogy transcription software.
www.jacobboerema.nl/en.
- “Deciphering the Handwritten Records of Early America.” *State Archives of North Carolina*.
<https://ncarchives.wpcomstaging.com/2017/08/18/what-does-that-say-series-pt-i/>?
- “Genealogical Dictionary of Legal Terms.” *FamilySearch.org*.
www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical_Dictionary_of_Legal_Terms.
- GenScriber. Genealogy transcription software.
<https://genscriber.com/en/>.
- “Glossary.” *U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management*.
https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/reference/default.aspx?id=05_Appendices|01_Glossary.
- Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy*. 4th Edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2017. Chap. 2, pp. 29–56, “Language, terminology, and Important Issues” and Chap. 20, pp. 529–545, “Abstracting Probate and Land Records.”
- Koford, Rebecca Whitman. “Abstracting Documents.” *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIV, no.4 (December 2019), 17–23.
- Leary, Helen F. M. *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History*. Second Edition. Raleigh, North Carolina: North Carolina Genealogical Society, 1996. Chap. 6, pp. 106–116, “Abstracting.”
- Lederer, Richard M. *Colonial American English: A Glossary; Words and Phrases Found in Colonial Writing, Now Archaic, Obscure, Obsolete, or Whose Meaning Have Changed*. Essex, Connecticut: Verbatim Book, 1986.
- “Roots: Dictionary of Genealogy & Archaic Terms.” *Rootsweb.com*.
<http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~randyj2222/genealogy/gendict.html>.
- Sperry, Kip. *Reading Early American Handwriting*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2008.
- Stryker-Rodda, Harriet. *Understanding Colonial Handwriting*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1980.