ABSTRACTS, TRANSCRIPTS, AND EXTRACTS

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"How much of this should I type?" The speaker was at a nearby microfilm reader at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. An experienced researcher, she was struggling with the transition from lugging home pounds of paper to recording information on a laptop computer.

It is an important question. Let's look at some options.

- using a form
- abstracting
- transcribing
- extracting

USING A FORM

Many companies and software programs offer fill-in-the-blank forms for common documents such as deeds and wills to help assure that the researcher will not omit an important element of a document. These may be helpful learning tools for beginners (although if the deed forms have slots for "grantor" and "grantee," this may not be so helpful, since neither term typically appears in a deed).

Professionals and long-time researchers often will not use forms. They know that documents do not necessarily fit a standardized template. Furthermore, the clues to difficult genealogical problems are often in words and phrases that don't have an assigned spot on a form. The danger of omitting important information by not using a form is overshadowed by the more real possibility of missing an important lead by focusing on answering specific questions.

ABSTRACTING

Recording just "the important stuff" is known as "abstracting." So, what is important? First of all, probably anything that is on a typical form (above): full citation information, all names (including witnesses), all dates (including the ones about recording and such that follow the main document), and all places. So how is that different from a form, you ask? The answer lies in how we record it. Some of us design mini-templates for standard citation information, but we leave a large blank area for everything else. In that area, we would record information in a way more pertinent to the document.

For example, deed books have lots more than deeds in them. Somehow the terms *grantor* and *grantee* don't seem to fit many of the documents. I abstracted the Barren County, Kentucky, deed books through 1813 and found such documents as agreements (6 of them), apprenticeships (25), bills of sale of nonreal property (32), bonds (6), contracts (1), deeds of gift (17), depositions (3), partitions (5), leases (2), manumissions (1), mortgages or securities (11), patents (2) [one for a still, one for a washing machine!], plats (11), powers of attorney (43), prenuptial agreements (2—yes, they had them in 1805), quitclaims (only 2, surprisingly), and weather reports (2).

OK, admittedly weather reports aren't normally found in deed books, but the point is that sometimes it is easier simply to state what a document says than to try and fit it into a form. Each of those documents—on careful reading—made it clear that it was not a "normal" deed, but we also see normal deeds containing wording that isn't normal. How can we recognize the abnormal if we don't know the normal? The answer lies in the third type of recording—transcribing.

TRANSCRIBING

I am quite certain that an accident of timing had a great deal to do with the formation of my genealogical skills. Back in 1984, I bought my first personal computer. In order to gain practice in using my word processor (one in which you had to embed commands to turn on bold and then turn it back off), I transcribed the deeds and wills that I had been obtaining through laboriously typed letters to county clerks. My boilerplate computerized letters brought even more documents to my mailbox.

I found myself transcribing documents from the late 1800s, then the mid-1800s, and then the early 1800s. It wasn't long before I had progressed into the 1700s; eventually my research took me into the 1600s and earlier. Two important things happened as I transcribed.

First, I learned that deeds and wills, like my letters to county clerks, contained a number of standard (boilerplate) phrases. Admittedly, I was blessed by a couple of clerks with beautiful, clear handwriting. But I typed every word of every document, even though I could read the document easily without the typed version.

Thus, when I had to read the handwriting of the clerk whose scrawl made my forehead furrow, my eyes squint, and my mouth frown, it was not as difficult as it might have been. When I came to "hereditaments," I knew what the word was (OK, maybe not immediately, but I got it eventually), and "heirs & assigns" (even with the long "s") required only a brief pause before I continued typing with confidence.

I also became comfortable with the standard terminology. When phrases were different, my genealogical antennae started quivering, and I knew that this document might have more to tell me than I might first have suspected (for example, the absence of "heirs and assigns forever" might be meaningful).

Second, because I began transcribing fairly early in my personal research, I progressed backwards in time, learning to read the handwriting as I went. I did not begin with documents of Puritan immigrants, but when I got to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the forehead-furrowing, eye-squinting, and mouth-frowning was considerably reduced.

For me, at least, proper names are still the most difficult to read. I often don't have a clue in an early document what the clerk was writing. However, because I can read "In the name of God Amen" and "of the County and State aforesd," I can pattern-match the letters in the name to phrases that I can recognize.

There are added advantages in transcribing all documents. You won't ever have to read the handwritten copy again (unless some question arises about your interpretation of a word). The text is ready at hand on your computer. You won't have to leave your desk to find a piece of paper. If you use a laptop on research trips to the library or a distant county, the rewards are multiplied. When corresponding with other family researchers, you can easily copy-and-paste the text into your word processor or e-mail from any Windows or Macintosh program.

EXTRACTING

This form of recording a document derives naturally from the experience of transcribing. Basically, you begin at the beginning, transcribing the document. When you arrive at text that you clearly recognize as boilerplate, you dot-dot-dot it. That means you insert ellipses points where the text would be.

These three dots (. . .), with a space between each, mean "something left out here." If you aren't certain, or if the boilerplate phrase helps keep the meaning of the extract flowing, type the words.

You may also wish to use editorial square brackets in places. For example, "[detailed metes and bounds description]" or "[three pages of inventory valued at $538.43]." If this is your ancestor's only piece of land or his inventory, you might choose to include a full transcription of this section, but for an unplaced person of the same surname, you just want a reminder that there is more there so you can go back to it if it becomes significant later.

"How much of this should I type?"

The answer depends to some extent on the reason for which you've read the document (ancestral versus broad information gathering). But I would suggest that transcribing all ancestral documents is a valuable educational experience and that you will naturally progress to extracting documents as your experience grows.