

CHECK IT OUT: WRITTEN ITEMS CHECKLIST

Every historical manuscript is unique. But whether you've got a letter, diary, or other handwritten item, the main questions are the same: **who wrote it, when, where, and why.** You may be able to answer some questions immediately, or you may never find solutions. Adapt your investigation to the item at hand, and enjoy exploring a personal artifact from the past.

DID YOU KNOW...

1840 Steel-nibbed pens are in use

1883 The fountain pen appears

1874 Remington typewriters for sale

1945 The first viable ballpoint pens

Planning

- Prepare to take careful notes of your investigation. You may want to have separate categories for manuscript topics, dates, people, and places.
- Keep a chronology or timeline of significant events and places mentioned in the text. It will help you visualize the sequence and relationship of facts.
- Investigate as if a court will view your written report. Think like a detective, and be sure your conclusions are based on fact, not speculation.

Materials

- Where was the manuscript found? When and how? Note the physical surroundings and nearby objects. This may help date the manuscript.
- What are the materials? Itemize the feel, color, condition and appearance of the writing surface and any binding. Note variations within the item(s).
- What was the writing instrument? Pencil, quill pen, steel pen? Ink characteristics may help an expert date the manuscript.
- What does the handwriting look like? Neat or scrawled? Does it seem young and strong, or old and shaky? Are there many errors?
- Are there stains or dirt? Look closely for clues of inky fingerprints, blood, red clay soil, etc. [Do not clean the manuscript in any way!]

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- Note the exact location and placement of any loose enclosures (e.g. photos, pressed flowers) tucked into the pages. Give each a separate investigation.
- Look for written dates on the binding, envelopes, covers, etc. Use a strong light and magnifier to look for dates in embossed leather, paper watermarks.

Integrity

- Is the volume or collection complete? Are there other diaries and letters in the set? Are any pages missing? Either lost, or torn or cut from a diary?
- How frequent are the entries? Are diary entries daily or irregular? Are letters bunched by seasons, or written every Sunday? Look for patterns.
- By reading the text, can you find any clues or signs that the manuscript was written as a draft? Are there edits by the author? References to copying?
- Does it appear that someone has handled, marked or edited the manuscript previously? Perhaps the author, a family member, or someone else?
- If faded ink is impossible to read, a qualified expert may be able to help by using UV and IR light techniques, or chemical treatments.

Content

- What can you deduce about the author's motives or intentions? Is it a travelogue for friends at home? A love letter hidden behind formal prose?
- Are any obvious topics or events ignored? Are there peculiar silences? What might be the reasons (e.g., calming worried parents) for avoiding issues?)
- What motivates the writer? Can you find patterns of events (e.g., time of day or week, or emotional states) that prompted the author to write?

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Support

- Seek corroborating primary sources, e.g., photos, land records, military service records, newspaper articles, or other documents by the same writer.

- Consider consulting an archivist or manuscript historian to discuss document dating, historical or monetary value, and long-term care of manuscripts.