A ONE-SHEET GUIDE

Reading old German church records

Most German parish registers from the 1600s to the early 1900s are written in **Kurrent**, the old German handwriting. Below, each letter next to its modern form; small red numbers mark the classic traps.

LOWER CASE



a b c d e[2] f[1] g h[4] i j k[4] l m n[2]

o p q r s (long)[1] s (round)[1] t u[3] v w x y z ß

UPPER CASE



A[5] B C[5] D E[5] F G[5] H I[5] J[5] K L[5] M

N O[5] P Q R S T U[3] V W X Y Z

LETTERS WRITTEN TOGETHER



ch sch ck st ss tz ä ö ü

THE CLASSIC TRAPS

1 **Long s and f.** Long s, the normal s at the start of and inside a syllable, reaches below the line like f – but f has an extra loop or cross-stroke. Round s ends a word or syllable: *Orts·bürger*.

2 **e and n.** The Kurrent e is two short strokes and looks like a narrow n. Count the strokes, then read the whole word rather than the single letter.

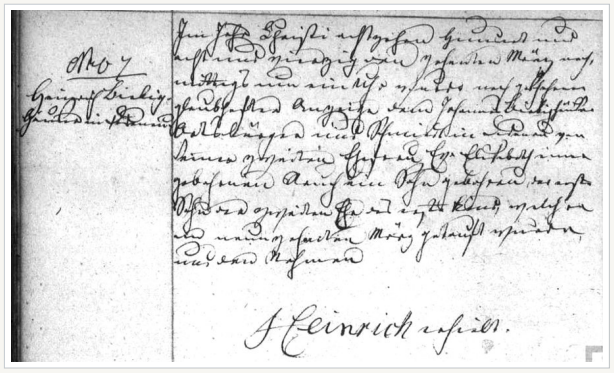
3 **u with a bow.** The bow over u is no umlaut – it tells u apart from n. Umlauts (ä, ö, ü) carry two short strokes or a tiny e; the two dots on y belong to the letter.

4 **h and k.** Both start with a loop above the line. The h also has a long loop below the line; the k stays on the line and has a small cross-stroke in its stem.

5 **Capitals that look alike.** I and J are one form. C, E and L share their opening stroke – look at how they end. A, G and O start with the same bow; G reaches below the line.

The letters shown are a clean copybook model of 1788. Real hands of the 1800s slant more, run letters together and simplify – so trust shapes in context more than single letters.

TRY IT: A REAL ENTRY



In the margin: the entry number, *No 7*, and the child's name. **The last two lines:**

> *und den Namen Heinrich erhielt.*
> … and received the name Heinrich.

The name *Heinrich* is in Latin script, the words around it in Kurrent. Names and words of Latin origin are often written this way – which makes them easier to spot.

Baptism of Heinrich Biebighäuser, Dodenau, 1848 No. 7 (detail). Zentralarchiv der Evangelischen Kirche in Hessen und Nassau, Darmstadt, KB Dodenau, Taufregister 1839–1852, p. 482.

Words, months and numbers you will meet

WORDS IN EVERY BAPTISM, MARRIAGE AND BURIAL ENTRY

getauft	*getauft* baptized	copuliert	*copuliert, getraut* married	hinterlassen	*hinterlassen(e)* left behind, surviving
geboren	*geboren* born	Bräutigam	*Bräutigam* groom	alt	*alt … Jahre* aged … years
geborene	*geborene, geb.* née (maiden name)	Braut	*Braut* bride	Ortsbürger	*Ortsbürger* citizen of the village
ehelich	*ehelich* legitimate, born in wedlock	ledig	*ledig* single, unmarried	Beisasse	*Beisasse* resident without full rights
unehelich	*unehelich* illegitimate	Junggesell	*Junggesell* bachelor	Bauer	*Bauer* farmer
Sohn	*Sohn* son	Jungfrau	*Jungfrau* maiden, unmarried woman	Ackermann	*Ackermann* farmer, husbandman
Tochter	*Tochter* daughter	Witwer	*Witwer / Witwe* widower / widow	Taglöhner	*Taglöhner* day laborer
Pate	*Pate, Gevatter* godparent, sponsor	gestorben	*gestorben* died	Schmied	*Schmied* smith
todtgeboren	*todtgeboren* stillborn	begraben	*begraben, beerdigt* buried	Schneider	*Schneider* tailor
Ehefrau	*Ehefrau* wife	weiland	*weiland* the late (deceased)	Leineweber	*Leineweber* linen weaver

weiland Jacob = the late Jacob. *hinterlassener Sohn* = a son whose father had died. *Jungfrau* simply means an unmarried young woman. Spellings vary: *todt* for *tot*, *copulirt* for *copuliert*.

MONTHS

MONTH	LATIN FORM	OLD GERMAN NAME
January	Januarii	Jänner
February	Februarii	Hornung
March	Martii	Lenz, Lenzmonat
April	Aprilis	Ostermonat
May	Maji	Maimonat, Wonnemonat
June	Junii	Brachmonat
July	Julii	Heumonat
August	Augusti	Erntemonat, Augstmonat
September	**7bris**, 7ber	Herbstmonat
October	**8bris**, 8ber	Weinmonat
November	**9bris**, 9ber	Wintermonat
December	**Xbris**, Xber	Christmonat

7bris is September, not July: the Roman year began in March, so *septem* (seven) became the ninth month. Old German month names varied by region – check them against the dates of the entries around them.

NUMBERS WRITTEN AS WORDS

1	*eins, ein*	11	*elf, eilf*
2	*zwei, zwey*	12	*zwölf*
3	*drei, drey*	20	*zwanzig*
4	*vier*	30	*dreißig*
5	*fünf*	40	*vierzig*
6	*sechs*	70	*siebzig, siebenzig*
7	*sieben*	100	*hundert*
8	*acht*	1000	*tausend*

Units come before tens: *achtundvierzig* = eight-and-forty = 48. *achtzehnhundert und achtundvierzig* = 1848.
Days are ordinals: *den zehnten März* = 10 March, *den einundzwanzigsten* = the 21st.

LATIN FIRST NAMES

Joannes	Johannes, Johann	John
Henricus	Heinrich	Henry
Jacobus	Jakob	Jacob, James
Georgius	Georg	George
Ludovicus	Ludwig	Louis, Lewis
Catharina	Katharina	Catherine
Elisabetha	Elisabeth	Elizabeth
Margaretha	Margarete	Margaret

Latin names change their ending with the grammar: *filius Joannis* = son of Johannes, *Henrici* = Heinrich's.

FIVE TIPS FOR READING

1. **Read the whole page first.** Get a feel for the hand and for how each entry is built before you try a single word.
2. **Compare with words you know.** Find the same letter in a word you can already read – a month, a name, *geboren* – in the same hand.
3. **Start in the margin.** It often holds the name and the entry number, so you know what the entry is about.
4. **Dates in words and in figures.** The text often spells the date out, while the margin or a column gives it in figures. Check one against the other.
5. **Don't trust a single reading.** Write what you see, not what you expect. Mark every doubt with [?] and read it again another day.

Kurrent letters set in Heimwyn Hand, a renamed subset of Peter Wiegel's "18th Century Kurrent Text" (SIL Open Font License 1.1), after J. F. Kiechel's copybook, Strasbourg 1788.