

# The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives Transcription Guide

January 2010: Last revised, June 2012

## Overview

This document provides technical guidelines for the transcription of handwritten archival material, especially correspondence. The guide is not intended for the transcription of sound recordings. The creation of typed transcripts can powerfully facilitate research, as uniformly-formatted, typed documents are easy to skim for content and electronic text files are keyword-searchable both individually and as a group. Additionally, electronic transcripts can be made widely available on the web (if appropriate, depending upon copyright status and confidentiality concerns). However, the creation of transcripts is time consuming and should only be undertaken when there is a compelling reason to do so, such as in the case of handwritten material with high research value. Transcripts are not intended to replace original material and are most appropriate presented with the originals or scans/photocopies of originals close at hand.

Note that the creation of transcripts often requires subject knowledge and additional research, as contextual information can assist the transcriber in deciphering words, names, and sentences. Once made available, researchers with expertise in the area may advise on corrections or supply relevant information. Such edits or addenda should always be seriously considered, and incorporated into master files when appropriate.

Transcripts should be created in Microsoft Word using 11pt Times New Roman and converted to PDF format for delivery to the public either through the web or email. Word files should always be retained, even after the creation of PDFs, as future edits or notations may be needed.

The following guidelines are divided into three parts. The first is an overview of how to approach the main elements of a letter that the transcriber will encounter; the heading, body, and closing passages. The second part of the guidelines focuses on the standard in-text editorial notations. The final part provides guidelines on the format of transcriber-supplied information, such as historical context or physical description notes. Examples excerpted from letters transcribed using this guide are included throughout, and examples of fully transcribed letters follow in Appendix I.

## 1. Parts of letters

### **Heading**

Notes about content and outstanding physical characteristics pertaining to the entire or a significant portion of the original documents may be noted in left-justified bracketed italics before the heading (e.g., [*Note: Relates to the purchase of Velazquez Juan de Pareja (MMA 1971.86)*]; [*Stationary has a black border*]; [*Written on newsprint*]). Headings of letters are subject to a great deal of variation and are standardized for the purpose of legibility in transcript form. Addresses, either handwritten or printed on stationary, are left justified; and dates are right-justified on one line following the address.

### **Body**

Transcriptions of the body of handwritten letters are left-justified regardless of original format. Original pagination is not maintained, but an indication of physical page is supplied in brackets. Original punctuation, capitalization, spelling and abbreviations are maintained as much as possible, including dashes that are sometimes used to replace periods. Indications of the word “and” are noted with an ampersand (&). Paragraphs can be difficult to determine in handwritten material, and thus are ignored. Periods may be inserted without editorial notation where a paragraph or line breaks without punctuation. Original inserted text is not distinguished or noted, such as with a caret(^), but incorporated into the text as indicated by the author.

### **Closing**

Valedictions can be extensive and tend to vary in their placement on original letters. To maintain consistency and legibility in the transcript, such closing phrases will be appended to the body of the letter, even when they are made distinct through spacing in the original. Periods or commas may be inserted to indicate line breaks in these cases. Signatures are left-justified and follow the body of the text after a line break.

## 2. Standard notations

The following chart contains standard editorial notations for transcripts.

Notations	Definition	Example
[ <i>illegible</i> ]	One illegible word.	There are two plates of the same character the [ <i>illegible</i> ] Kensington, and they were bought as far back as 1854 for about £35 each.
[ <i>illegible words</i> ]	More than one illegible word. The editor may also use "phrase," "sentence," "passage," etc.	collection it would answer the picture as the name [ <i>illegible words</i> ] in English sale catalogue [ <i>illegible words</i> ] in it as considered a very good origin.
[ <i>sic</i> ]	Word typed as it was found	So don't give me away gratuitously [ <i>sic</i> ].
<del>Deletion</del>	Word or words that have been struck or scribbled out, when they are still legible.	and I <del>confer with</del> can tell Henry Wallis what they say; Wallis is a very good man to advise, & he can get the National Gallery "varnisher & taker-off of varnish" to look at the picture.
[ <i>illegible deletion</i> ]	An illegible word or words that have been struck or scribbled out.	There is no [ <i>illegible deletion</i> ] similar fear respecting Turner, but on the contrary, I learn more about him every day.
Illegi[---]	Part of word illegible. Dashes correspond to approximate proportion of illegible letters.	
[ <i>loss</i> ]	Loss of word or words due to physical damage (torn, discolored) of paper.	We have had an unusually hard time of it here in the old country and I see every other day in the papers accounts of "blizzards" and other unpleasant visitations on the other side of the Atlantic [ <i>loss</i> ]
Lo[ <i>loss</i> ] to a part of word	Loss of part of word due to physical damage (torn, discolored) of paper.	
[Supposed word or phrase]	Transcriber is not certain about word or phrase.	and of which time alone can [mitigate] the [bittersweet].
Supp[osed] part of word	Transcriber is not certain about part of word.	

### 3. Supplied information

**Content Notes.** Notes about content that apply broadly, rather than to a specific part of the item, are inserted at the very top of the document and are italicized, bracketed, and preceded by the italicized word “*Note:*” Any physical description notes directly follow subject matter notes with a line break between.

Example:

*[Note: Joseph Wicht to Mary Cassatt [?]. Wicht appears to be Mr. "W." mentioned on pp. 153, 155 and 156 of Sixteen to Sixty by Louisine W. Havemeyer in connection with the Havemeyers' "discovery" of "the 'Cardinal' and a wonderful landscape by Greco, a view of Toledo" and their purchase of "'The Portrait of Wellington', [which] was the only one we bought through W" (p. 156) The letter, written in French, also has one page in English and a different handwriting which appears to be that of Mary Cassatt who in all likelihood, received the letter from Wicht, wrote her comment on the letter and then forwarded it to the Havemeyers. Translated from the original French.]*

**Footnotes.** Footnotes are utilized for cross references to related material or the transcriber’s commentary regarding the content of the source material, and can be inserted within sentences for precision.

**Example:**

I then purchased another amazing Rembrandt<sup>1</sup> on my second trip to France.

**Physical Description Notes.** Physical description notes are italicized and bracketed. Physical description notes that apply to the whole or most of the item are inserted at the top of the document, directly following any bracketed content notes. Physical description notes relating to a specific part of a letter are inserted into the text with a line break above and below to set them apart from the transcribed text. These notes can include information about the position of words on the page, the location of large losses, the presence of sketches, stamps, or other notable physical characteristics.

**Example 1:**

it lest the "interest in Turner should be extinguished by some new comet." Turner is, for me, the ~~only~~ one landscape painter in the world, and I expect his fame to be eclipsed by another when we

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have another Shakespeare, or another Dante, but not till then. I merely named other painters with him in "Modern painters" in order to avoid the appearance of utter insanity, and of adulation of the old man:- [illegible deletion]

**Example 2:**

room is the prettiest small dining room they ever saw. One should not praise his own things but I really am proud of my dining & breakfast rooms. I wish you could see them.

[The following is written along the left side of page 1]

I have some china and am looking carefully for more. I will get you the handles you speak of.

G. H. B.

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art Accession number 89.15.3, “Man with a Beard.” The painting has since been attributed to an unknown painter in the style of Rembrandt

*[Includes a sketch.]*

**In-Line Supplied Information.** Shorter notes containing supplied information, such as dates, are also italicized and bracketed, but may be inserted into the relevant line of text and include qualifying notations followed such as “ca.” or “?”. Examples follow:

**Examples:**

June 12 [*1887?*]

[*ca. Thanksgiving*] 1912

SAA Museum Archives Section Working Group Example

## Appendix I.

1a Old Bond Street, W.  
London  
Telegraphic address Deschamps, London.

Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup> 82

My Dear Sir,

I have received from [Fillig & Co.] order from you to "Buy Velasquez, if not done", so that I have written to the owner to include the bargain, & I congratulate you on your purchase. In your letter of the 21 Sept, which I have just received, you say that "I should be very very careful," etc. I can assure you that there is not the slightest doubt but that it is a genuine Velasquez, and a fine specimen. I have wired to you saying that I could go to Cologne for you to attend the sale. It so happens that I intended being in Holland just about the time of the sale,

[Page 2]

so that I can do the two at the same time. I now await instructions. Have written to a friend of mine there for a catalogue. I should only buy for you if the things were very good. I will inquire about Mr. Chavet. I have just been offered a collection of Japanese work in Paris, and am going there to examine it. If I think it good enough, I will keep you "au courant". I do know about Japanese art better than any other. Believe me, Dear Sir, Yours faithfully,

Ch W. Deschamps  
E.G. Marquand Esq

SAA Museum Archives Section Working Group Example

**Appendix I.**

Guernsey Building.  
160 Broadway.  
New York

Nov 17<sup>th</sup> 82

Dear Sir

I have your [*illegible*] of Nov - showing your purchase of 2 Gubbio plates and [*illegible*] I trust they are good from the prices paid, I will direct you later how to send them to me. I hate to pay such a fearful duty & if any of my family come over in a few weeks I will have them brought over as part of luggage. I shall want the Velasquez with some

[*Page 2*]

Interest. It will be mindful to have a sworn invoice in order to save trouble at C House here. It would not surprise me if I should take the steamer after Dec 15 & see what London has so for the moment I will do nothing. Kindly let Mr. Boughton have the £112 left and when I get a moment of leisure will write you fully. Yours,

HG Marquand

[*The following is written on the side of page 2*]

very much obliged for Hamilton priced catalogue

SAA Museum Archives Section Working Group Example

## Appendix I.

Newport

29 Sept [1882]

Dear Sir,

I wrote you of a sale at Cologne 16 October, it lasts a week. What would give me great delight would be to buy at fair prices, some Majolica. This is not to be sold until 23 October. I would [illegible] one Hispano Manneresque or two if they go cheap. Common ones are found here plenty of them but fine

[Page 2]

examples are scarce. I do not set my heart so much on these as the other make of Italian fine majolica. One cannot judge from a catalogue but I should fancy some of the numbers about 150 & 160 ought to be good. Nos 175, 176 177 178 & 179 [Gublin]. Would be glad of one or 2 of these. Say also

[Page 3]

2 examples of [Urbrino], 1 good Caffegiola 215, 216, 231, these read well & as to the [Otini] 2, I fancy it will bring a big price. At moderate price I would like that - the value so much depends on the quality. If you know how I can

[Page 4]

get a hold of a few choice things I will be obliged to you. If you should go I would give a commission to do the best you could. Should you not reach any of them I would buy 727 - a silver Tankard and any other fine pieces of silver. Should like a few specimens of fine ivori [sic] work if they are very rare in case majolica fails. Yours truly,

HG Marquand

[The following is written on the side of page 3]

I will instruct Am Ex 449 [Strand] to cash your

[The following is written on the side of page 2]

draft on [illegible] for 200£.