



Writing in a nutshell

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I. THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING

Basic information about writing that can be obtained at first sight is whether we are dealing with majuscule or minuscule. We all use both of them on a daily basis. Majuscule is writing where the letters are all the same size, e.g. A B C D G J P. Minuscule is when the letters are of different heights (some stems of letters are extended up, others down), e.g. a b c d g j p. A precise definition of the type of writing we are dealing with when relating to hand-written materials from various ages requires much more advanced knowledge and is the essence of writing science.

At first, the evolution of writing was connected with the type of material and the writing tools used. The fluidity and freedom of dashes depended on what the writer wrote on and with which tools. This also influenced the shape of letters, e.g. it could force the use of only straight lines.

Another factor which shaped the development of writing was the expectations connected with it. Writing was to convey content, however, it often also had the objective of creating an aesthetic impression on the readers. On the other hand, mankind wanted to write down information increasingly quickly,  and this forced a lower level of care about the aesthetics of texts and the loss of legibility. In the end, reconciling the fast writing of contents and maintaining the high level of aesthetics of hand writing turned out to be impossible. This meant that writers increasingly rejected majuscule writing for minuscule. Next, there was a move towards a more individualized form of cursive writing, which facilitated fast writing. There was also writing with various applications. Majuscule writing was used for more ceremonial texts, e.g. inscriptions or great books, minuscule was a more general type of writing, and cursive was for practical usage – for fast writing of documents of less importance.

Trends in art also influenced the development of writing. The shapes of letters reflected similar movements to those that shaped the development of art and architecture. And as in art, the development of writing over the ages was conditioned by local influences and differences.

The history of Latin writing (in a nutshell) is opened by **capital**. This was an elegant majuscule with a

regular, geometric shape, thanks to which it was possible to carve in stone or other hard materials. Ancient Romans used the more rapid and less careful **older and younger cursive** for fast writing.

When writers began to use other writing materials than stone, which were much easier and faster to write on, other types of writing developed. The first of them was **uncial** – writing that was still majuscule but already rounder and lighter, and easier to write on soft material; next was **half uncial**, which was minuscule writing. With their roots in ancient capital, uncial and half uncial were the start for other types of writing used in Europe.

In the middle ages in our part of Europe, **Carolingian minuscule** became popular. This type of writing is connected with the rule of Charles the Great and the renaissance in art, known as the Carolingian Renaissance. This writing was used between the IX and XII centuries and also reached Poland.

At the turn of the XII and XIII centuries, following the same direction as art and architecture, writing started to change, taking on stronger Gothic forms – letters became longer and lines sharply broken. In this way, **Gothic writing** was established, and was used until the end of the middle ages. Gothic forms were majuscule, minuscule and cursive, taking new forms that differed locally or were designated for various uses (e.g. Blackletter, Fraktur, Kurrent and Bastarda). From Gothic writing, German national writing developed and, thanks to this, Gothic elements stayed for the longest period in writing in German-language countries.

Gothic writing was ousted during the Renaissance, when a return to ancient patterns took place in many areas of art. At that time **antiqua** was created – this was elegant book writing based on Carolingian minuscule, and indirectly on the previous ancient scripts. For clerical use, however, a cursive writing was adopted, known as **italics**. From renaissance writing grew modern national writing and, as a result, modern writing was shaped.

II. ABBREVIATIONS

The necessity of fast writing shaped not only the appearance of letters – it also gave birth to the need for shortening expressions. The second reason for shortening them was to save writing materials. They were expensive, so they were used economically – the shorter the written text, the larger the savings. In this way, the systems of abbreviations was born (from the Latin word *abbreviatio*), which were particularly well developed in the middle ages.

Abbreviations used in Latin writing can be split into 3 groups, that is, shortening by:

- cutting/suspending the ends (from the Latin *per suspensionem*) – in such abbreviations only the beginning of the expression remained (in some cases only the first letter remained)
- contractions (from the Latin *per contractionem*) – in this case only the beginning and end of the expression were written, e.g. the first and last letters or the first, middle and last letters
- the use of signs – the sign replaced the whole expression or its part.

The abbreviations which we use today can also be placed into these divisions, e.g.:

1. Prof. - cutting the end

2. Mr. - contraction

3. & - a sign

Just as Latin writing, the systems of abbreviations also have their roots in ancient Rome. The Romans used scribal abbreviations, in other words, expressions (most frequently names) shortened in such a way that, in some cases, only the first letter is written. They also created a system of signs – the so-called Tironian notes – which were the beginning of the abbreviations used in the middle ages. Medieval scribes used a developed system of abbreviations, belonging to all the three above-mentioned groups. In texts written in national languages, some of the abbreviations were adopted from Latin, however, together with the appearance of printing and the use of paper (cheaper than parchment), abbreviations began to disappear.

If you have problems deciphering the following sentence written in the XII century with abbreviations, then you should take a look at the next page.



d[omi]n[u]s Lup[us] ep[is]c[opus] p[ro]p[ri]etatis p[er] cui[us] manu[m] elemosina data e[st]

There you will find examples of abbreviations used in the middle ages, which you can meet most often. Abbreviations definitely hinder the reading of old texts, and in the event of trouble, it is worth taking a look at publications in which you can find sets of abbreviations used in various periods. The most well-known of them is *Lexicon abbreviaturarum: Dizionario di abbreviature latine ed italiane* [5] by Adriano Cappelli. You can find more bibliographic tips here: **Worth reading**.

III. SAMPLES OF SHORT FORMS

It is worth remembering these forms of shortening words:

1. Truncation marked by a horizontal line



am[en]



an[te]



no[n]

2. Drawing in marked by a horizontal line



no[m]i[n]a



d[omi]n[u]s



om[ne]s

3. Drawing in marked by an overwritten letter



t[r]iginta



n[e]c



q[u]otiens

4. Symbols of short forms

scribal abbreviations with the use of the letters **e**, **q** and **p**



est



que



quod



quia

per/pre/pro



per/par



np. pau[per]



pre/prae



pre[fate]



pro



np. [pro]vid[er]e

-con/com (a sign resembling the number 9)



con



np. [con]cordasse



np. [con]sensu

-us (a sign resembling the number 9, usually overwritten)



us



np. castellan[us]



np. dom[us]

-er/re/ir (a sign in the form of an apostrophe or vertical wavy line)



np. et[er]ne



np. t[er]minis

-rum



rum



np. tempo[rum]



np. bono[rum]

-et/ed/us/ue (a sign resembling a semi-colon or the number 3) - this sign changes its meaning depending on the letter it follows:



s[ed]



s[ed]



videlic[et]



duab[us]



utiq[ue]

-ur/tur (a sign resembling the sign of infinity or the number 2)



teneat[ur]



igit[ur]



servat[ur]

et



et



et

Medieval scribes perfected the art of shortening expressions, willingly and imaginatively using short forms, that's why even in one word we can find a few different types of short form:



ho[mi]nib[us]



cont[ra]ov[er]sia



[per]petualit[er]



fut[ur]o[rum]



t[er]rib[us]



[pro]pt[er]



[com][par]entib[us]

In national languages, as mentioned previously, some short forms that appear in Latin are used. In texts written in Polish, however, short forms appear much less frequently. This is due to the fact that Latin was the dominant language in the period when the art of using short forms was at its peak, however, when Polish became more widely used, short forms did not play such an important role.

Short forms in Polish



Testame[n]tu



Panskie[g]o



postanowione[g]o



Crak[owski]

Short forms in German



h[err] b[er]tol[t]



tocht[er]



geb[ur]t



selbe[n]

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