

## Principles of abbreviation

There are two main types of abbreviations used in medieval manuscripts: suspension/truncation and contraction. There are also a variety of abbreviation marks (often called *sigla*) used to stand for certain combinations of letters (either alone or in context), as well as the use of superscript letters and signs.

**Suspension/truncation**

Abbreviation by suspension or truncation is the oldest form of abbreviation, and is often found on Roman inscriptions. In inscriptions, this form of abbreviation usually uses the first or first few letters of a word, followed by a period. For example:

S.P.Q.R = Senatus PopulusQue Romanus

Con. = Consul

In Latin manuscripts, this leads to some abbreviations that will seem familiar:

e.g. = exempli gratia      etc. = et cetera      i.e. = id est

As well as some that will be less familiar to non-Latin readers:

b. = the ending -bus      scil. = scilicet

Sometimes a period before and after a letter can indicate an abbreviation:

.e. = est      .n. = enim      .t. = tunc

Two dots (looks like a modern colon) or a point and a virgula (either looks like a modern semicolon or a figure three) is also used as an abbreviation.

After a vowel, these marks indicate that the letter m has been omitted: so omne: omne: or omneꝝ = omnem

The same marks can also represent a suspended et (or more) -- e.g. d: or dꝝ = debet; h: or hꝝ = habet

The same marks can also represent a suspended -is, -ue (after q) or -us

nob:      atq;      omnibꝝ

One of the most common abbreviations used in medieval manuscript is the suprascript line or titulus.

Over a vowel, this indicates the suspension of m orn:

mete

Over or through a consonant, the titulus can have a variety of meanings depending on usage:

$\overline{b}$ = =ber, -bra, -bre, -bis, etc.	$\overline{c}$ = can, com, cen, cum, etc.
$\overline{d}$ = dem, dis, dum, etc.	$\overline{f}$ = fer or for
$\overline{g}$ = gen, ger, gre	$\overline{h}$ = hen, her
$\overline{e}$ = el, le, or ul	$\overline{m}$ = mem, men, mun
$\overline{n}$ = ne, nem, nen, non, num	$\overline{p}$ = pre or prae
$\overline{q}$ = que	$\overline{r}$ = re
$\overline{s}$ = ser	$\overline{t}$ = tem, ten, ter, tur
$\overline{u}$ = consonantal u/v - ven, ver	

### Apostrophes

Apostrophes are one of the most common sigla used for abbreviation in medieval documents (they are frequently seen for abbreviating names in charters, for instance). An apostrophe can mean just about any part of a word has been suspended.

Here are some common examples:

a' = autem      dd' = dicendum      it' = item      p' = post

### Suprascript letters

These are often written above another letter to indicate abbreviation:

$\overset{i}{u}$  = ubi       $\overset{o}{h}$  = homo       $\overset{i}{n}$  = nisi

Oblique line (usually through the letter l)

$n\text{/}$  = naturaliter       $u\text{/}$  = universalis

## Contraction:

Pure abbreviation by contraction contains only the first and last letters of the word, where impure contraction contains the first and last and some of the letters in between.

If you see a titulus above more than one letter, this indicates abbreviation by contraction.

$\bar{n}c$  = nunc       $\bar{t}n$  = tamen       $\bar{a}ia$  = anima

Appostrophes and suprascript letters can also be used:

$sb'$  = sub       $a^+$  = aut       $a^{\theta}$  = anima       $c^{\theta}$  = contra       $m^i$  = mihi       $p^{\theta}$  = prima

## Sigla

Sigla are a type of medieval shorthand for certain very common letter combinations. Here are the most common:

$\mathcal{C}$  = cen, co, com, con, cum, cun. (usually seen at the beginning of a word)

$\bar{p}$  = per, par, or por (p with a bar through the descender)

$\bar{p}$  = pre or prae (as noted above)

$\mathcal{P}$  = pro (p with a curved line)

$\bar{q}$  or  $\overset{i}{q}$  (bar through descender or suprascript i) = qui

$\bar{q}$ ,  $\overset{v}{q}$ , or  $\overset{e}{q}$  = quae

$\mathcal{Q}$  = quod

A wavy line over a consonant means to add "re" =  $\overset{3}{d}ixit$  = dixerit

A wavy line through a long "s" means to insert "er" or "ur"  $\mathcal{S}$

A suprascript letter over c, g, p, t, x, or u means that r (or sometimes r+ a consonant) needs to be supplied:  $\overset{i}{c}ca$  = circa

A siglum that looks like the figure "2" (often in suprascript) means to insert er or ur in that position:

$dicit^2$  = dicitur       $ce\overset{2}{t}o$  = cetero

A siglum that looks like the numeral 4 at the end of a word usually means either the genitive plural or the ending -um or -em.

ear<sup>χ</sup> = earum      meo<sup>χ</sup> = meorum

A siglum that looks like the numeral 9 in suprascript signifies s, -is, -ius, -os, -us, etc.

cui<sup>9</sup> = cuius      dieb<sup>9</sup> = diebus      e<sup>9</sup> = eius

A siglum that looks like the number 7 (with or without crossbar) is a Tironian note indicating the word "et" (and). It can be used (usually at the end) of a word in place of "et" or even as a generic suspension sign (similar to an apostrophe)

7,7 = et      7̄ = etiam      hab7 = habet

Special abbreviations:

Ever wonder why you see a lot of illuminated capital "X"es? What looks like an X is actually the Greek letter chi. If you see an abbreviation that looks like xpc (originally) or xps (later), you are looking at the abbreviation for Christus (chi-rho-sigma). Similarly, ihc or ihs is Jesus (Iesus) - iota-eta-sigma. (A lot of folks mistakenly believe that this latter abbreviation stands for "in hoc signo.")

Can the principles of abbreviation be used in English?

Absolutely! Not only are there a lot of English words with Latin roots that lend themselves to the use of various sigla and methods of abbreviation, there is no reason--particularly if you have a long, charter-style text--that these principals cannot be adapted for use with English words.

I am particularly fond of the Tironian note for "et" and use it in my scrolls for "and" consistently when using a Gothic hand.

There is one medieval scribal abbreviation that should be mentioned in particular: it looks like a Y with a suprascript e, and as a result, many thought it was the word "ye". It is in fact the letter thorn with a suprascript e, and is the word "the". *ye*

Correcting your mistakes

There are a number of ways of correcting mistakes in medieval manuscripts that can be used. Probably the most attractive from the standpoint of not breaking up the flow of the script is to simply put a dot over the top of any letter that should be stricken. You can also draw a line through a letter or an entire word. Omitted letters or words or entire passages can be noted in the margins and an asterisk placed where the text should be placed. If you omitted a letter, consider finding an appropriate contraction sign and simply placing it in suprascript or above the letter immediately before where it would go.

## Sources

Capelli, Andreas. "The Elements of Abbreviation in medieval Latin Palaeography."  
<http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/1821>. Short guide to the general principles of  
abbreviation, with lots of examples.

For those actually working with medieval manuscripts and needing to look up strange  
abbreviations you come across, Capelli's *Dizionario di Abbreviazione Latine ed Italiane* is the  
classic reference. There is also now a subscription web database called Abbreviationes that  
helps researchers identify abbreviations.

The Wikipedia article on scribal abbreviations gives a good overview:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Scribal\\_abbreviation](https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Scribal_abbreviation)