Making a transcript of a manuscript text

A transcription is a precise record of a text as it exists in an individual manuscript. A transcription allows anyone else to see exactly what is contained in the manuscript text by reading your careful transliteration. The transcription is usually the first step in the preparation of a text for subsequent editing and interpretation. Before starting to transcribe, you should quickly read through the text; make an alphabet of the letter-forms used by the scribe; and make notes on the scribal characteristics of aspect (overall ‘look’) and dactus (pen-angle, number, order, and direction of pen-strokes).

1. Transcriptions should be written legibly in pencil on lined paper, writing only on alternate lines; or double-spaced in a digital document.

2. There is no need to replicate the layout of the original. Line-ends in the manuscript should be indicated by the use of an oblique stroke: atque / cantibus

3. Point out rubrics, illustrations, new columns, or new pages square within bracketed notes. All comments of your own noting specific features in the manuscript should be underlined and in square brackets; e.g., [a large initial A is written in green ink]. In this example, the manuscript has a green capital ‘A’ opening the text. Since the ‘A’ is in the manuscript, it is not underlined, but anything you, as the transcriber, note or add must be underlined.1

4. All words should be spelled, letter for letter, as they occur in the manuscript.

5. Special letter-forms (in Old English or Latin, for example) should be retained.

6. The usage of the manuscript should be retained for the following:
   - capital letters
   - numerals
   - punctuation (including hyphens and accents)
   - word-division2
   &., 7

7. Indicate interlineations (that is, corrections or additions put in by the scribe above or below the written line) by single quotation marks ‘ ’ or insertion marks , ,

8. Abbreviations should be expanded when possible:

---

1 Notes in square brackets in transcription are not intended for discursive information about individual letter-forms; that is, you would not note ligatures, or the form of a letter, since you will do this in your description. Notes are to alert a reader to, for example, a littera notabilior; a space in the manuscript; an erasure, etc.

2 If a manuscript is using scriptura continua (continuous writing, without word division), then you, too, should do this. If the scribe is clearly using a form of consistent word-division, then you can follow this word-division. However, if the scribe’s word-division is inconsistent (sometimes as we would see it in modern editions, and sometimes not) you can adopt a consistent, modernized word-division. Add a comment that your scribe utilizes inconsistent word-division, or a word-division that doesn’t equate with modern practices. That will alert your reader to look closely at the manuscript forms.
i) the letters forming the expansion should be underlined with a straight line if there is no doubt about what should be supplied;
ii) where there is doubt about the expansion, use a wavy underline beneath the letters you have provided;
iii) if extending the abbreviation correctly is impossible given the information available, use an apostrophe mark to show where the abbreviation occurs in the manuscript word.

9. Where damage to the manuscript has caused loss of text, show this by the use of square brackets containing, where feasible, a point for each missing letter: [   ] or [....]

10. Where a word has been corrected in the manuscript, put the corrected reading in the transcription, but also add a description of the correction within square brackets; e.g., devotion [divotion, first i crossed through, e written above].

© Elaine Trehane, i.iv.14 (adapted from A.R.Rumble’s teaching materials)