

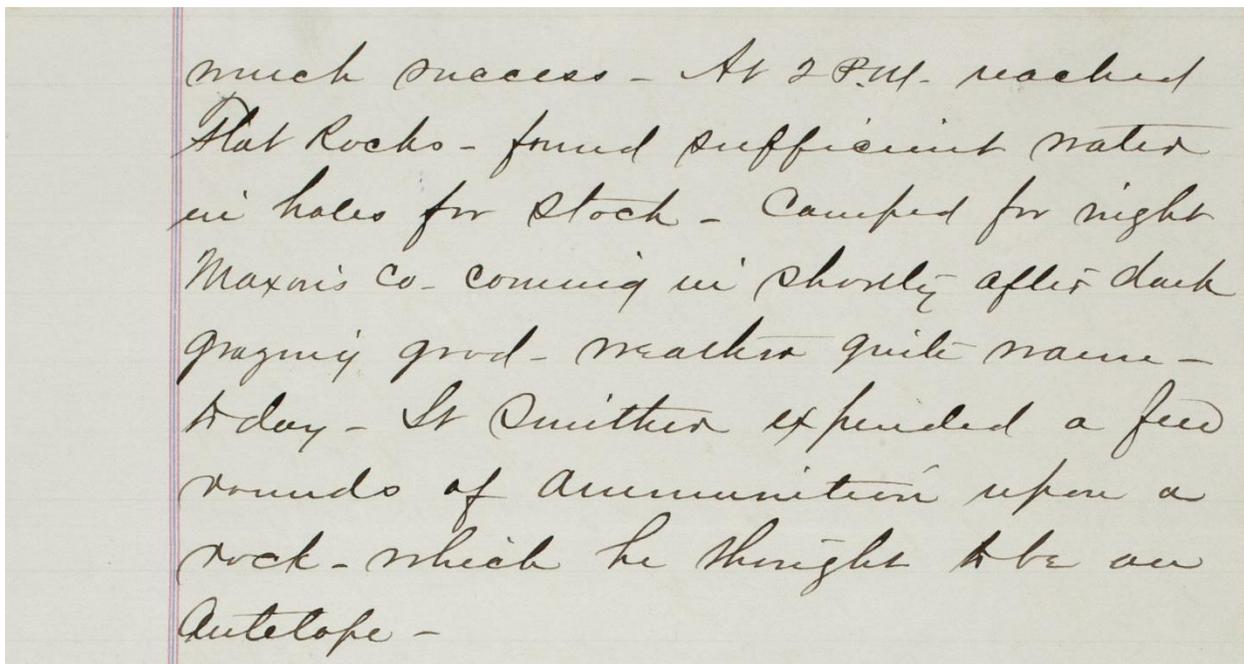


## Skills Lesson: Reading a Transcription

Many of the primary sources you see in textbooks and history books are transcriptions of handwriting. A transcription is the text of a primary source such as a letter or a diary—or even the audio of an oral history—typed up so that it is easier to read.

### Transcribing Letters

[This image is from a diary written by C. S. Hodges during a trip in 1878-1879.](#)



This is what the transcription looks like:

... At 2 P.M. reached Flat Rocks – found sufficient water in holes for stock -- ... Maxon's Co. coming in shortly after dark, grazing good – weather quite [?] today – Lt. Smither expended a few rounds of ammunition upon a rock – which he thought to be an Antelope [sic]

### Transcribing Conventions



Explain to students that there are certain **conventions** that transcribers use. These are symbols, marks, and other things that show the reader certain things about the original, about the transcription, and about the differences between them.

- **[?]** When the transcriber can't figure out what a word is, they may use square brackets with a question mark in its place. [?] can also appear after a word a transcriber guess at but isn't certain of.
- **[unclear]** Instead of [?], sometimes transcribers use the word "unclear" in square brackets when they can't figure out what a word is.
- **[word]** When the original writer crossed out a word, the transcriber may put it in square brackets. Sometimes people who quote primary source use square brackets to indicate that they have inserted a word or words to clarify meaning.
- **[\*words]** If the original writer added a note in the margin, the transcriber may put it in square brackets with an asterisk before it.
- **[sic]** Transcribers generally do not fix spelling, grammatical errors, or punctuation. Sometimes, though, they want to point out that the error is in the original. That's when they use [sic].
- **Ellipsis** When you see three periods in a row, something has been left out.
  - The ellipsis may show that there was more before the transcription started or more after it ended.
  - People who quote primary source texts often leave out sentences or parts of a sentence that they think are beside the point. They put in ellipsis (or should) to show that there is more there in the original.
  - If you see four periods, that just means there was a period at the end of a sentence before the ellipsis started.