Say what?
Tips and tricks for deciphering difficult handwriting

What this presentation is and is not about

- It is mainly about how to figure out what word(s) someone wrote on documents, such as census records or ship manifests around the start of the 20th century. Difficulties may arise from such things as
  - faded ink
  - damaged documents
  - non-standard spelling
  - poor penmanship
  - abbreviations
  - different writing styles

- It is about reading <u>difficult</u> writing, not necessarily <u>old</u> handwriting.
  (For samples of alphabets for older time periods, Google it.)
- It is about documents written in English, although tips may apply to documents written in other languages as well.
- It is a general introduction to using a photo editor, but not a detailed tutorial.
- It is not a history of writing styles. These have changed dramatically over the centuries, and styles continue to change.
- It is not about how handwriting is taught these days. That debate continues elsewhere.

Preparation

- You might want to make a copy that you can write on (paper or electronic).
- If you have a paper document, take a digital photo or scan it into a jpg so you can enhance the image.

Whole Document Techniques

1. Turn the document upside-down. Some people say that this perspective helps them.
2. Find the document on a different website. The image quality may be better.
3. Enhance the image. We'll look at the Windows built-in photo viewer

- Enlarge the image
- Vary the contrast
- Increase/decrease brightness
- Apply filters

The are several free online apps: e.g., Pixlr at https://pixlr.com/

Word tips
1. In the electronic copy, use a yellow highlighter over the word. This may improve the readability.
2. Trace over the word.
3. Compare the word/letters to more legible words in the document. If you are viewing a document online, also check adjoining pages for comparison.
   a. Try to look for several examples of every letter of the alphabet (you'll need to do this separately for upper case and lowercase letters).
   b. On your copy, draw lines that separate the letters of the word. This can help focus on deciphering individual letters.
   c. Look at particular combinations of letters; for example, how are letters written if they follow an "o", "v" or "w" (these are letters that end with the pen high on the line).
   d. Count the peaks of letters which could be any of the following: i, m, n, r, u, v, w.
   e. Study the sequence of pen strokes used to write each letter and practice writing the letters in the period handwriting. When you compare a mystery letter to your samples you can try to match pen strokes — look for particular elements of the letter and don't be concerned if they have been minimized or exaggerated.
   f. Be aware that one writer may use two different forms of a letter.
   g. For the letters "i" and "j", check whether the writer always, usually or never writes the dot and, if the dot appears regularly, note where it occurs and what is its shape. This will help you decide whether a dot is part of a letter or whether it's just a speck of dirt.

Other
1. Investigate duplicate sources. For example, for arrivals at Ellis Island, you can look at the original passenger manifest, or the index prepared by the Ellis Island Foundation, or the soundex index in the National Archives (also available from your local Family History Center). Also, from 1908 to 1937, New York City kept two separate and independent sets of marriage records. One was maintained by the Department of Health and the other by the County Clerk's Offices. (Both are now at the New York City Municipal Archives.)
2. Ask for help.
3. Ignore the document for a couple of days or a week, and then take another look.

Sources
15 Techniques to Triumph Over Poor Penmanship - John Hoenig
http://fluke.vims.edu/hoenig/pdfs/penmanship.pdf

Different language resources
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Genealogical_Word_Lists

U.S. Passenger List Annotations and Markings
https://www.thoughtco.com/us-passenger-list-annotations-and-markings-1422263