Orthography refers to the standard system for writing in a particular language and includes accepted usage and spelling. Characteristics of 18th Century English and American writing and printing are distinctive. It's important for students to be aware of differences in order to effectively search and read 18th Century manuscripts and print materials.

During the 17th & 18th centuries, all personal writing was handwritten. Reading and writing were taught as separate skills and one's literacy depended very much upon their class, occupation and gender. Thus there are wide variations in personal communication skills. Commercial writing could either be handwritten or printed with handset type on a press.

**Type/Handwriting issues:**

- Upper case letters were used to begin nouns as well as to begin sentences.
- The elongated or medial "s" was written in elongated form at the beginning of a word, in the middle of a word, and when written twice, as in pass. The elongated s can be mistaken for an f and ss can look something like a p.
- In words like "the", y could stand for the th and the e was added in superscript. The y was pronounced as we pronounce a th today.
- In some hands, upper case K, P, and R can look similar, as can J and T. Also, at times L and S will be confusing because of similarities.

**Spelling issues:**

- Spelling was not standardized. Writers would spell words differently in different documents or even within a single document.
- Samuel Johnson created the first British English dictionary, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, in 1755. However, Noah Webster did not publish the first American dictionary until 1806, with a more comprehensive volume, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, in 1828. Until these publications (and long afterwards), writers would often spell according to the phonetic sound of the word rather than upon any kind of spelling rule.
- Words were often abbreviated. There are several that are common, but sometimes the writer would abbreviate according to their own rules. You may need to determine the word by reviewing the context of the sentence or larger document.
- Proper names were often shortened. Some that you might see often are George = Geo.; William = Wm.; Jonathon/John = Jno.
From: Low's almanack for 1782. Library of Congress, American Memory. rbpe 1110040b http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.1110040b

PLUNDERED by some of the Militia from the Subscriber, out of the House lately occupied by John Chandler, Esq. the Day after the Enemy left this Town; sundry Articles of Mens and Women's Apparel; such as Caps, Sashes, Petticoats, Blankets, Frills, Stockings, and some things which Decency forbids enumerating in an Advertisement: Also some Pewter Basons and Porrings a. Whoever will return the same, shall receive Fifty Dollars Reward. They may be discovered by a very elegant Woman's Cap, made of Gaze of an uncommon Figure, taken at the same Time.

Nov. 16, 1779

J. C. OGDEN.