

# Terms to Know about Manuscripts

This list was prepared by Dr. Tom Sienkewicz for students in his "Introduction to Classical Studies" class.

**manuscript:** (abbreviated **ms.**) any document written by hand as opposed to being printed or reproduced in some other way

**palaeography:** the study of ancient writing, including the practice of deciphering, reading, and dating historical manuscripts

**codex:** a book made up of a number of sheets of paper, vellum, papyrus, etc.

**folio:** A book or manuscript of the largest common size, usually about 38 centimeters (15 inches) in height, consisting of large sheets folded once in the middle, making two leaves or four pages of a book or manuscript.

**parchment:** writing material made from animal skin, especially sheep and cow

**vellum:** a special writing material made from calf skin

**recto:** the reverse side of the page in a bound item such as a codex or book

**verso:** the obverse side of the page in a bound item such as a codex or book

**incunabulum:** a book produced in the earliest stages (before 1501) of printing from movable type

**provenance:** the chronology of the ownership, custody or location of a historical object.

**rubric:** a word or section of text which is traditionally written or printed in red ink to highlight it

**majuscule:** a large letter, either capital or uncial, used in writing or printing

**minuscule:** a small cursive script developed from uncial between the seventh and ninth centuries and used in medieval manuscripts.

**uncial:** a style of writing characterized by somewhat rounded capital letters and found especially in Greek and Latin manuscripts of the fourth to the eighth century A.D.

**bifolium:** a sheet of writing support material folded in half to produce two leaves (four pages)

**quire** or **gathering:** a number of bifolia folded together

**quarto:** (abbreviated **4to** or **4°**) a book or pamphlet produced from full 'blanksheets', each of which is printed with eight pages of text, four to a side, then folded twice to produce four leaves (that is, eight book pages). Each printed page now presents as one-fourth size of the full blanksheet.

**octavo:** (abbreviated **8vo** or **8°**) is a technical term describing the format of a book, which refers to the size of leaves produced from folding a full sheet of paper on which multiple pages of text were printed to form the individual sections (or *gatherings*) of a book. An octavo is a book or pamphlet made up of one or more full sheets of paper on which 16 pages of text were printed, which were then folded three times to produce eight leaves.

**illumination:** the decoration of a manuscript with luminous colors (especially gold and silver)

**incipit:** the opening words of a text

**explicit:** the closing of a textual unit

**watermark:** an image or design impressed into paper in the manufacturing process—  
resulting from wires twisted into shapes and sewn onto the mold used to make the  
paper

**textura:** (also known as Black Letter, "Textura," "littera textualis formata," "littera  
psalterialis" or "littera missalis") a Formal Gothic script primarily used for  
sumptuous liturgical books

**hairline:** very fine line on a typeface or a style of type using such lines

**Book of Hours:** a Christian devotional book popular in the Middle Ages; an abbreviated  
form of the breviary; the most common type of surviving medieval illuminated  
manuscript.

**Breviary** a liturgical book of the Latin liturgical rites of the Catholic Church containing the  
public or canonical prayers, hymns, the Psalms, readings, and notations for everyday  
use, especially by bishops, priests, and deacons in the Divine Office (i.e., at the  
canonical hours or Liturgy of the Hours, the Christians' daily prayer)

**Psalter:** a volume containing the Book of Psalms, often with other devotional material  
bound in as well, such as a liturgical calendar and litany of the Saints

**Missal:** a liturgical book containing all instructions and texts necessary for the celebration  
of Mass throughout the year