



Secretaries

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The work of making and managing written information, including letters, drafts, notes, documents, and administrative records, is time consuming and may require special skills such as good handwriting and spelling, and mastery of organizational systems. As a result, those responsible for this work, whether in official positions or as private individuals, have often relied on helpers to carry it out. The terms by which these helpers were called have varied by context and emphasized different qualities. In ancient Greece and Rome educated slaves often performed these functions; Tiro worked for Cicero both as a slave and after his manumission in 53 BCE, taking dictation, checking references, and crucially safeguarding and editing Cicero's speeches and notes after his death. The Latin term "amanuensis" was commonly used to designate those who served "a manu" (by their hand, i.e., by writing); another term, "exceptor," designated one who could "catch" (excipere) spoken words. The Roman official "a libellis" dealt with petitions and the like. The term "secretarius" and its *vernacular equivalents originated in the medieval Europe and emphasized the helper's role as a confidant entrusted with secrets.

Under Elizabeth I the office of "secretary of state" was created; the trend of calling various high-ranking officers "secretaries" (and variants like undersecretaries, as the hierarchy became more complex) spread across many kinds of governments down to the present. These officers typically relied on a staff comprising further secretaries (with or without the title) to carry out their duties. Outside officialdom well-to-do and middling households relied on one or more servants among whom the division of labor was often fluid; secretarial work such as writing, reading, reckoning, or filing were performed alongside other duties in the household.

Family members, including sons, daughters, and wives, could also help in these tasks. By extension from these characteristic tasks the term “secretary” has also designated manuals for writing business letters (starting in the late sixteenth century), a type of handwriting (eighteenth), and a writing desk (nineteenth).

In the nineteenth century offices tended to be small: the male business partners relied on and worked in close proximity to their male clerks. By contrast, in modern parlance, “secretary” conjures up the vast number of mostly female employees, hired at lower wages than male clerks had been, to work in offices of all kinds starting in the late nineteenth century. They worked with *shorthand (present in England since 1588 in many different systems, but standardized only much later, e.g., with Pitman’s system of 1837), the typewriter (first marketed by Remington in 1878), and various duplicative and communicative technologies (Dictaphone trademarked in 1907, mimeograph, telex, among many others). The secretarial ranks were segmented by task (in patterns often correlated to social class, with stenographers at the bottom of the hierarchy). Work in large “pools” of typists all but eliminated a personal relationship with an individual employer or the content of the work. The work of the secretary was depersonalized and mechanized in the quest for efficiency and lower costs.

In the twenty-first century “secretary” has waned in favor of other terms like “office assistant”; in 2000, for example, National Secretaries’ Day, established in the United States in 1952, was renamed Administrative Professionals’ Day. The people they work for are now called “principals.” The spread of personal computers used directly by said principals in addition to their assistants has generally reduced the numbers of office helpers, as software can handle many of the tasks that once required human labor. Nonetheless high-ranking leaders still often rely on executive administrative assistants. Meanwhile, IT (information technology) help services have

grown apace instead; and the bulk of keyboarding has often been outsourced to offshore locations, including to workers who cannot understand what they are typing on the grounds that they may be more reliable, but certainly also because their wages are lower.

Throughout the many social and technological changes over the centuries secretaries consistently played a crucial role in carrying out paperwork and managing it. Equally consistent has been the conception of their work as mechanical, ideally carried out so well that no one would notice their role as intermediaries between the person they served and the work attributed to him or her. It is thus often difficult to determine exactly all the work that secretaries performed, and with what amount of independence or direction from their employer. Our best evidence for their work often lies in the surviving manuscripts that they wrote or that discussed them (such as letters seeking to hire a secretary or letters of recommendation). Even in the modern period, when a secretarialy produced business letter typically included the initials of the secretary under the principal's signature, we cannot tell whether the secretary typed the letter based on a draft written or dictated by their employer or instead composed the letter based on more or less detailed instructions. Sinclair Lewis offers a memorable depiction of this work in *Babbitt* (1922) when Miss McGoun expertly transforms the lead character's dictation of a few ungrammatical clauses into a coherent business letter. Uncertainty about the independence of secretarial work is all the greater for earlier periods when even fewer records survive: we can often identify the handwriting of a secretary by its neatness compared to that of the principal, but we cannot tell how the text was composed.

These close yet hierarchical relationships included many oral interactions invisible to the written record, but occasionally the exchange of ideas in both directions is visible in surviving drafts. In his study of early seventeenth-century English letter writing, James Daybell

documents, for example, secretaries both receiving feedback on letters they had drafted and in turn offering comments on letters drafted by their employers. In the early periods secretaries across many different contexts were expected to be intellectually versatile and well informed as needed to help their employers. The huge scope of their potential purview is evident in the thirty-volume *encyclopedia written by a clerk in fourteenth-century Cairo; as Elias Muhanna has shown, al-Nuwayri's *Ultimate Ambition* grew out of his experience as a secretary and encapsulated the knowledge that others in this line of work might need, addressing a massive range of topics, from history and politics to natural science and medicine, in 2.5 million words.

Until the late nineteenth century secretaries were predominantly men, although well-born women also relied on maidservants for similar services (Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example, hinges on the ability of the servant Maria to imitate the handwriting of her mistress Olivia). The rise of *Renaissance Italian diplomacy generated many new secretarial positions in which skill at writing in humanist prose was especially valued. A position as secretary could constitute a career or an entry into a life of writing or administration. Thomas Wolsey (1471–1530), whom his enemies identified as the son of a butcher, rose to become Lord Chancellor of England by dint of his administrative skills. Edmund Spenser (1552–99), author of the *Fairie Queene* and other major works of poetry, served as secretary to multiple aristocrats. Secretaries were also responsible for organizing written records and managing access to them. They created individual or shared systems for marking letters received and outgoing for example, and for sorting them by date, or recipient, or topic, according to their purposes and preferences. Secretaries served as de facto gatekeepers to these papers as well as to their employers themselves. In case of the principal's death secretaries played a crucial role in the disposition and possible publication of the remaining papers; they might even clash with the wishes of the

family, on the strength of their mastery of the content and organization of the papers.

One of the longest-running roles of secretaries has been to record speech in writing, whether by taking dictation or by making a written record of oral delivery, for example in sermons, lectures, or court proceedings. In ancient and medieval Europe dictation was the norm for compositions of all kinds, including letters, documents, and treatises. The complaints of the ancient orator Quintilian or the church father Jerome about dictation—that it encouraged the author to compose too fast and thus required revision—confirm that assessment. Nevertheless, autography (or writing in one’s hand) was also practiced throughout these periods, and valued for giving the writer more privacy and more leisure and control in composing, and the recipient a more personal connection to the author. The thirteenth-century Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas had famously illegible handwriting, which was another reason to dictate. Aquinas could rely on the help of fellow clerics, like his companion Reginald, who reported that Aquinas<<If he’s talking about Aquinas here, it would be good to repeat the name; otherwise the nearest referent is Reginald, which implies that he is the one who could dictate to three or four people at once.>> could dictate to three or four people at once. The latter skill had already been attributed to Julius Caesar by Pliny and Plutarch although they were writing decades after Caesar’s death—the skill likely signaled a “great man” instead of an actual practice. In a rare depiction of this activity one of Erasmus’s former secretaries depicted himself as a young man of twenty-six taking dictation from the great humanist at the age of seventy; the image printed almost twenty years after the relationship it depicts (and after Erasmus’s death) may well involve a certain idealization of the interaction (see figure 1).

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In the Renaissance a humanist education included emphasis on good handwriting, as

advocated by Petrarch and Erasmus among many others, and we have more evidence of autography. But composition by dictation remained a good option—for John Milton in his blindness, or Winston Churchill in his great haste to compose his lengthy histories before and after World War II. Business letters were commonly dictated to clerks or secretaries, who used stenography to take down regular speech. In the twentieth century the Dictaphone made it possible to separate the dictating from the transcribing in time and place. In the twenty-first century speech recognition software has replaced a person taking dictation in many circumstances, although court reporters and medical assistants continue to perform this work in person. Transcriptions by machine may be accompanied with disclaimers about garbled results, and with good reason. Similarly, *early modern authors warned of the errors of amanuenses, whether past, present, or future. The making and managing of texts has long been a collaborative enterprise; the work of secretaries, often ignored as merely mechanical, is an integral part of the history of the creation and diffusion of information.

Ann Blair

See also [ARCHIVISITS](#); [DOCUMENTARY AUTHORITY](#); [ERROR](#); [LETTERS](#); [SCRIBES](#); [SERMONS](#)

Further Reading

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Figure 1. “Gilbert Cousin of Nozeroy [France], amanuensis of D. Erasmus, age 26 in the year 1530. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, age 70 in the year 1530,” Gilbert Cousin, *Effigies Des: Erasmi Roterodami* (Basel: Oporinus, 1553). Reproduced with permission from Universitätsbibliothek Basel, AN VI 4a, pp. 7–8.