

Source – Save A Grave

By: Dawn

Safe Methods for Reading Worn Inscriptions

Reading epitaphs is a treat, but sometimes they are all but lost by erosion and other deteriorations of time. However, there are a few different methods available to you if you need to get information from the stone that you can't read. The most important thing to remember when trying any new method is to be careful, follow cemetery rules, and NEVER damage the stone.

1. Rubbings: This is a technique familiar to most school children. It involves placing a sheet of paper on the grave marker, and then taking a crayon, minus the wrapper, (or other recommended rubbing agent) and rubbing it sideways over the engraving. This produces some very beautiful images that capture the intricate stonework and texture of these old grave markers. Please see our page on responsible gravestone rubbing.
2. Mirrors: Older graves are more difficult to read when it's cloudy or overcast, so try and read the tombstones during bright or sunny days. For better contrast, use a handheld mirror to direct sunlight directly onto the stone. Tilt the mirror so that the light is reflected over the writing, this often brings the letters in focus more clearly.



Kurt Riegel's photo of him using a mirror to read a stone.

3. Water: Pouring clean water over an old stone may be all it takes in some circumstances. Wetting the stone makes the inscription appear darker.
4. Snow: If you live in a part of the world that gets snow in the winter take advantage of this and use it to read the stones. Using gloves take a hand full of snow and pat it on then lightly rub the snow around.



5. Black lights: If the writing is too faded to read, use a 75 watt black light bulb in any lamp that casts light directly on the written message. The writing will miraculously appear.

6. Aluminum Foil: An alternative to traditional wax or crayon type rubbings is that of aluminum foil & a damp sponge. Place foil on marker, dull side up so the sun doesn't reflect back into your eyes. Using the damp sponge press gently so as to not tear the foil around the carving or writing areas and instantly you have a 3-D impression of the marker that you can keep or ball it up and put it into your recycling bin. Also try reading the foil impression under different lighting situations. Sometimes it works better if the foil is placed on a tabletop under artificial light when trying to read it. You can see a sample of this at [Jane Gould's Find a grave memorial page](#).

7. Negative Photography: By using either a digital camera and viewing the pictures in negative format, or scanning regular prints into your computer and viewing using the negative (or reverse) option can be a highly effective way of reading worn stones. It just takes a little more time and adds steps to the process.

NEVER use Chalk, Flour or Shaving Cream, baby powder, talc, cornstarch or any other substance. All of these substance does damage to the stone.



This stone has flaking, only use a soft dry brush to try and clean off some of the flaking before using any method to read the stone.



This stone has some biological growth that you can also brush off with a soft dry brush.



You should not touch a stone like this one. It has been repaired and with any pressure the top could fall off.

<http://saveagrave.net/hard-to-read-stones>