

Department of ASNC Manuscript Handling Training¹ (at St John's College)

Dr Denis Casey – Monday 9th November 2009

*It must be remembered that a great and intimate knowledge of literature or history does not necessarily endow a scholar with the requisite care and skill for the handling and preservation of a valuable manuscript.*²

The Guiding Principle of Appropriate Manuscript Handling

For scholars (professional or amateur), and all those with even a remote appreciation of human heritage, the preservation of the remains of past material and intellectual cultures is universally held in high regard.

Scholars, in particular, keenly feel the need to preserve our manuscript heritage. Whether a manuscript is in the custody of an institution or in private ownership, scholars feel a doubly binding moral responsibility to ensure the safety of items temporarily in their possession. Firstly, the scholar owes a debt of gratitude to those who have preserved the manuscript over the centuries; without who the scholar's work would not be possible. It is, therefore, an act of common courtesy to our forbearers to treat this gift of the past respectfully. Secondly, the scholar is under obligation to preserve the manuscript for posterity and scholars of the future. A manuscript may have survived Vikings raids, Norman invasions, floods, fires, countless plagues, the dissolution of the monasteries and the Blitz; should its story end ignominiously in the twenty first century, thanks to human clumsiness with a cup of Starbuck's coffee?

Before you start

Ask yourself, 'Do I really need to view this manuscript'? As a rule, handling manuscripts should be kept to a minimum. Surrogates may be available, such as:

- facsimiles (exact photographic copies).

¹ This non-exhaustive guide is intended solely for your information and not reproduction. Readers should always check with manuscript proprietors/custodians when under any doubt regarding best manuscript handling practice, especially if it conflicts with that outlined in this guide. I would like to thank Gill Cannell, Rebecca Rushforth, Suzanne Paul and Jonathan Harrison for their suggestions regarding an earlier version of this guide, Melvin Jefferson and Edward Cheese for the loan of materials and Jonathan Harrison for hosting this event at St John's College. The opinions expressed herein and any mistakes and/or omissions are mine alone. The author, the Department of ASNC, St John's College and the Cambridge Conservation Consortium will not be held liable for any loss or damage to manuscripts caused by readers of this guide. Extensive use has been made of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization guide on the care and Handling of Manuscripts and all images remain copyrighted (© UNESCO, 2006. Cultural Heritage Protection Handbook N°2. Care and Handling of Manuscripts UNESCO, Paris).

² R. B. Haselden, *Scientific Aids for the Study of Manuscripts*, Supplement to the Bibliographical Society's Transactions 10 (Oxford, 1935), 33.

- microfiches (films containing photographs, which are viewed using a special reading machine).
- online images (e.g. *Parker Library on the Web* <http://parkerweb.stanford.edu>).
- diplomatic editions (transcripts of the manuscript).
- edited editions of texts.
- descriptions in printed and online catalogues.

Investigate these options thoroughly before approaching the institution that holds the original. Doing so will save you (and that institution) a lot of time, effort and money. If these items exist, but are not available locally, it may be possible to obtain them through the Inter-Library loans service (<http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/ill/>).

Approaching the Manuscript Custodian

Institutions (and private owners) have varying policies with regard to who views their manuscripts. Remember, you do not have a statutory right to view their possessions and they are within their rights to refuse you permission. Some institutions are quite open, while others keep exact logs of how often a manuscript is viewed and restrict scholars to a set number of viewings of individual manuscripts during their lifetime.

After you have exhausted the above mentioned alternatives and ascertained that you need to look at the original manuscript, you should then approach the custodian. You should remember to:

- enquire how that institution operates from colleagues who have visited it previously (particularly if it enforces complex and/or stringent procedures).
- make your enquiries to the institution well in advance of your intended visit. The institution may have highly restricted viewing times or be closed for weeks/months at a time. They may also require time to process your application.
- write ASKING PERMISSION in the institution's home language (or if impossible, apologise for not doing so).
- explain the nature of your work.
- indicate your experience of handling manuscripts (e.g. this training) and status (e.g. PhD student).
- indicate the exact manuscript(s) you wish to view.
- state when you would like to view them.
- state how long you would like to view them.
- enquire what arrangements you must make prior to viewing (e.g. registration).

The custodians may require you to:

- provide a letter of introduction from your institution (NB ensure the letter contains references to your previous experience with manuscripts).
- provide specific forms of identification (e.g. passport).
- register as a library user (this may take some time and also require references/ID).
- undergo specific induction training before granting you access.
- view a surrogate (e.g. microfilm) on the premises, before you look at the real thing (even if you have already done so elsewhere).
- submit to an interview (in which you should prove your familiarity with surrogates, familiarity with catalogues and secondary literature, knowledge of any controversies surrounding the manuscript and your need to view the original).

Some large institutions have online ordering systems, which you may use to pre-order manuscripts before your visit (e.g. British Library). If at all possible use these to minimise time and effort, especially if you must travel a great distance.

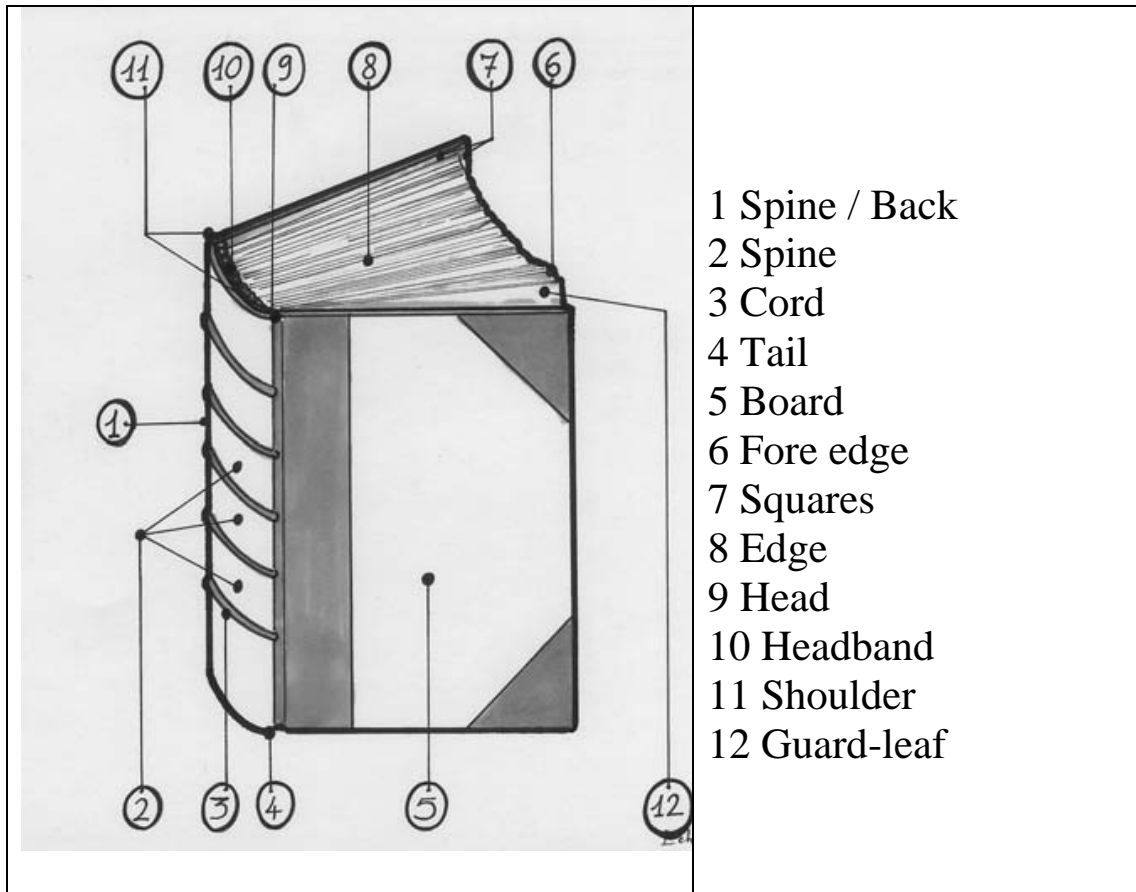
Golden Rules

- Handle manuscripts as little as possible.
- All manuscripts should be handled carefully, regardless of their physical condition.
- When in doubt over any point of procedure, ask the custodians. They will be delighted to help (as they are there not only to safeguard the manuscript but also to help the reader).
- Remember to be courteous to manuscript custodians at all time; you do not have an inalienable right to view their holdings.
- There are many risks to manuscript preservation (e.g. bacteria, fungi, insects, rodents, fire, liquids, variations in temperature and humidity) but the key risk is HUMAN CARELESSNESS.

Handling Guide Contents

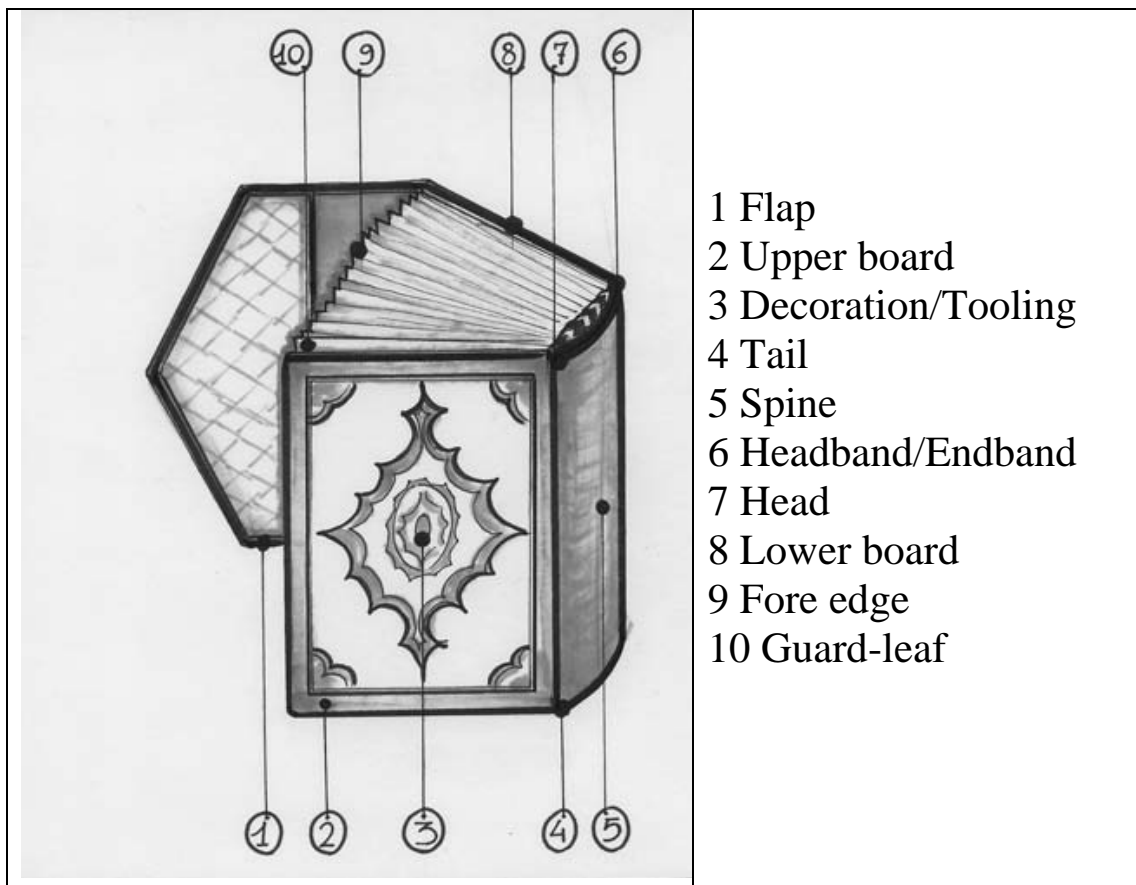
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Part 1a: A Typical Western Codex



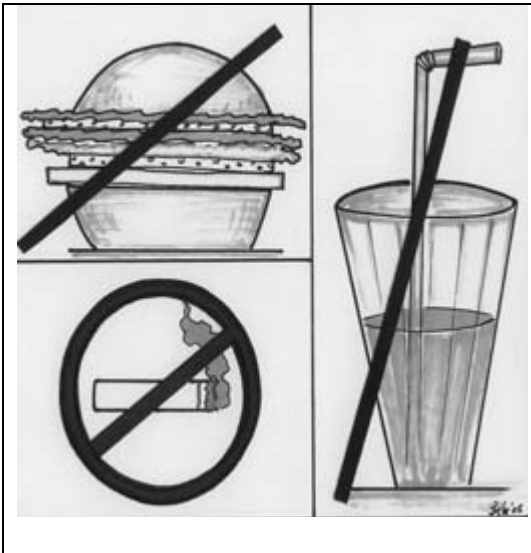
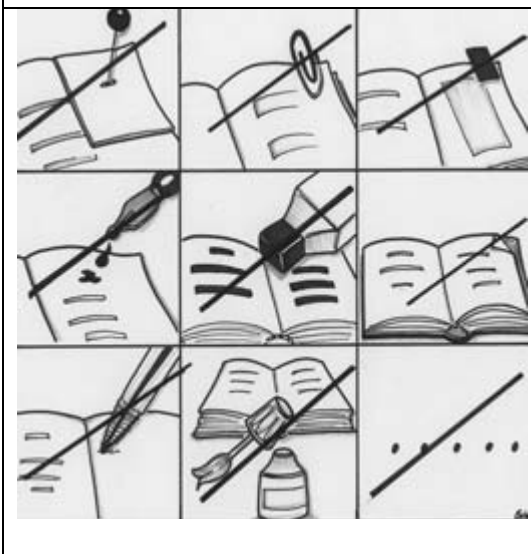
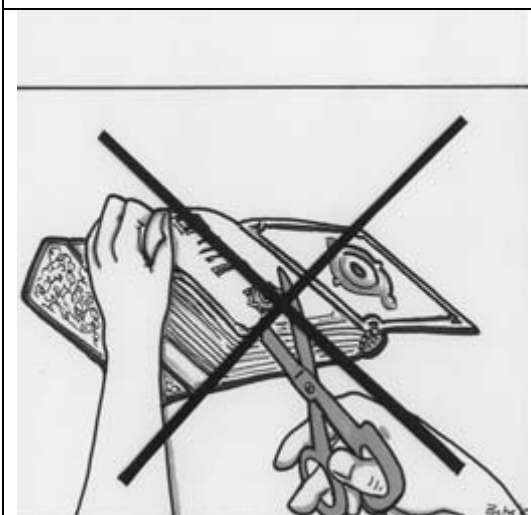
- 1 Spine / Back
- 2 Spine
- 3 Cord
- 4 Tail
- 5 Board
- 6 Fore edge
- 7 Squares
- 8 Edge
- 9 Head
- 10 Headband
- 11 Shoulder
- 12 Guard-leaf

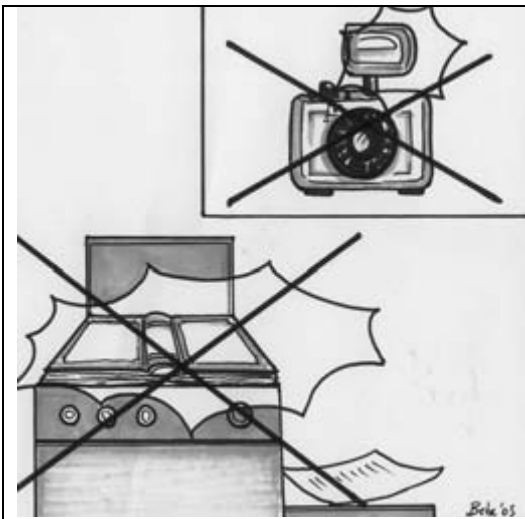
Part 1b: A Typical Arabic Codex



- 1 Flap
- 2 Upper board
- 3 Decoration/Tooling
- 4 Tail
- 5 Spine
- 6 Headband/Endband
- 7 Head
- 8 Lower board
- 9 Fore edge
- 10 Guard-leaf

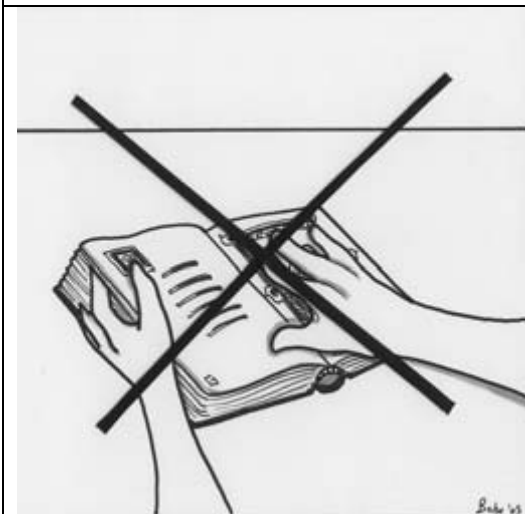
Part 2: Banned Substances and Banned Practices

	<p><u>Forbidden:</u></p> <p>Food Drinks Smoking and Tobacco Products Chewing Gum</p>
	<p><u>Forbidden:</u></p> <p>Pins Paperclips Post-it notes Fountain pens and inks Highlighter pens Thumbing down corners Markers Correction Fluids</p>
	<p>Do not cut or tear manuscripts.</p>

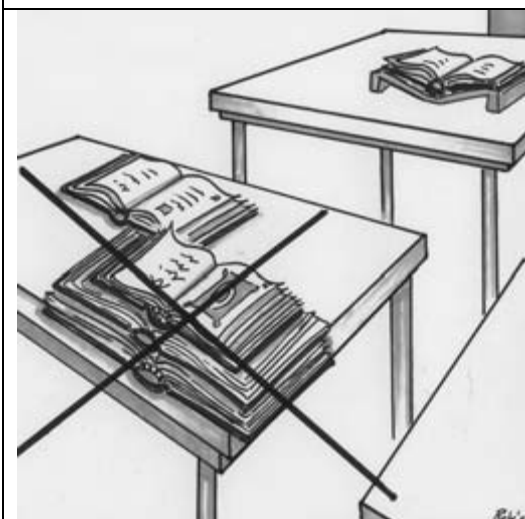


Do not photocopy or photograph manuscripts.

In some cases photography may be permitted, but you must first enquire of the custodians.

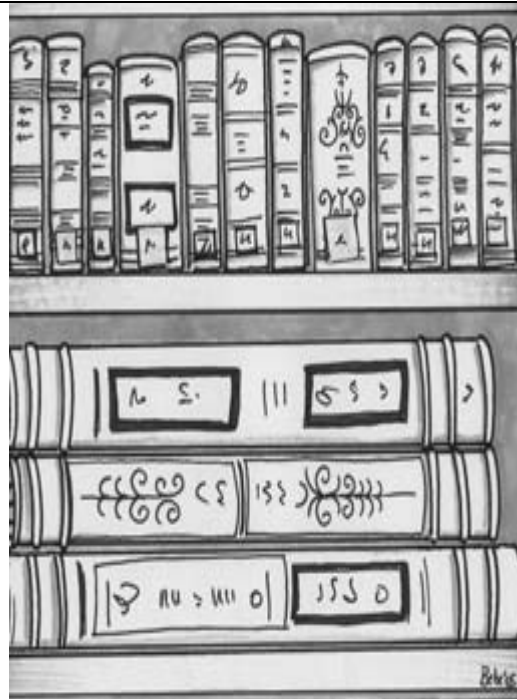


Do not touch text or images.



Do not stack open manuscripts on top of one another.

Closed manuscripts should not be stacked on top of one another, if at all possible.



If you must stack closed manuscripts on top of each other, do not stack more than three similar sized volumes on top of each other.

Never stack volumes which have metal clasps or external features, as these may damage other manuscripts.

Never stack volumes which have tanned covers, as the acid may damage the covers of other volumes.






Do not hold a pen, pencil or any other writing device in your hand while holding a manuscript.



Do not expose manuscripts to direct sunlight, as this may cause pages and inks to discolour and breakdown.

If you are seated in direct sunlight, ask to be moved to a more suitable seat.

Part 3: Basic Precautions before handling a Manuscript

 A black and white line drawing showing a person's hands being washed in a sink. Water is splashing on the hands. To the right of the sink is a paper towel dispenser with a roll of paper towels. Two paper towels are being pulled out. The artist's signature 'Bek's' is visible in the bottom right corner of the illustration.	<p><u>Wash</u> and <u>Dry</u> hands prior to handling a manuscript.</p>
 A black and white line drawing showing a person's hands being put into cotton gloves. The hands are positioned over a sink. The artist's signature 'Bek's' is visible in the bottom right corner of the illustration.	<p>Some institutions may require you to wear cotton gloves when handling manuscripts.</p> <p>Always enquire prior to handling a manuscript.</p>
 A black and white line drawing showing a cluttered workspace. There are several stacks of books of various sizes. A hand is reaching into one of the stacks to pick up a manuscript. A large 'X' is drawn over the entire scene, indicating that this cluttered workspace is not recommended. The artist's signature 'Bek's' is visible in the bottom right corner of the illustration.	<p>Ensure you have an uncluttered workspace before obtaining manuscripts.</p> <p>Manuscripts are often kept in boxes, which must be opened out fully in order to extract the manuscript.</p>

Part 4: Obtaining Manuscripts

Custodians may bring the manuscript(s) to your designated work area but there is the possibility that you may have to fetch the manuscript yourself.



Do not over extend yourself to obtain a manuscript, as you may damage the manuscript/ injure yourself in doing so. Ask the custodians if you may use whatever approved ladder, portable steps etc. the institution possesses or ask the custodian to fetch the manuscript for you.



Do not pull out a manuscript by the headband.

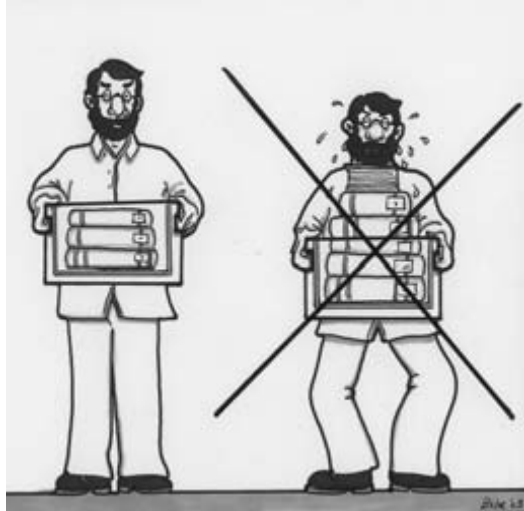
Doing so may damage the spine and cause leaves to become detached.



Grasp the book at centre of spine while moving aside the volumes next to it and slightly lifting it.



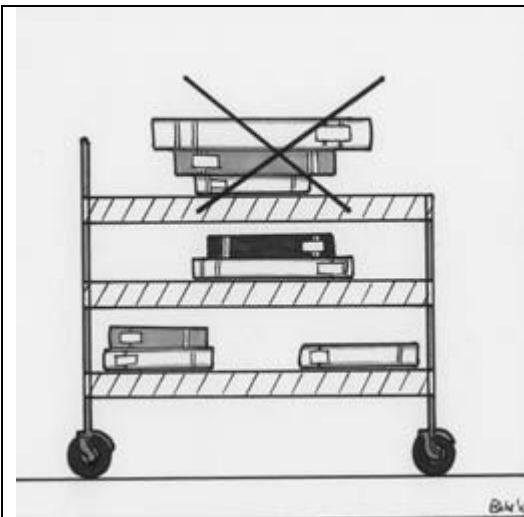
If there is sufficient space above, use both hands to slide the book towards you on its fore edge.



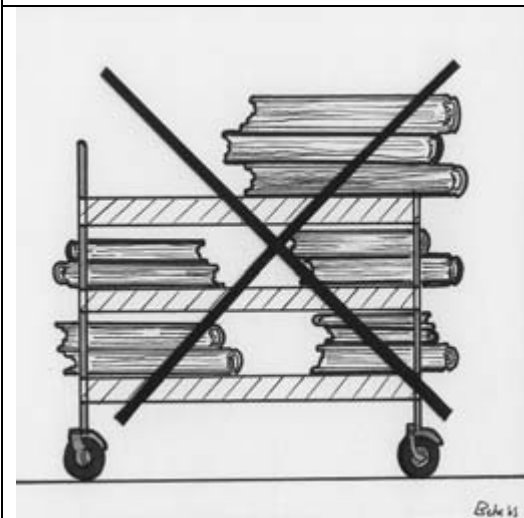
Do not carry more than three or four manuscripts at a time.



Use a trolley if you have to carry multiple manuscripts or large manuscripts.

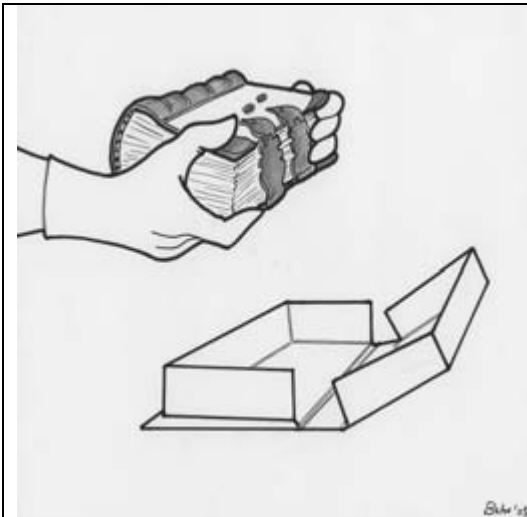


Do not stack large volumes on top of smaller volumes.



Do not allow manuscripts to overhang the edges of the trolley.

Part 5: The Manuscript at your Desk



Carefully remove the manuscript from its box/cover.

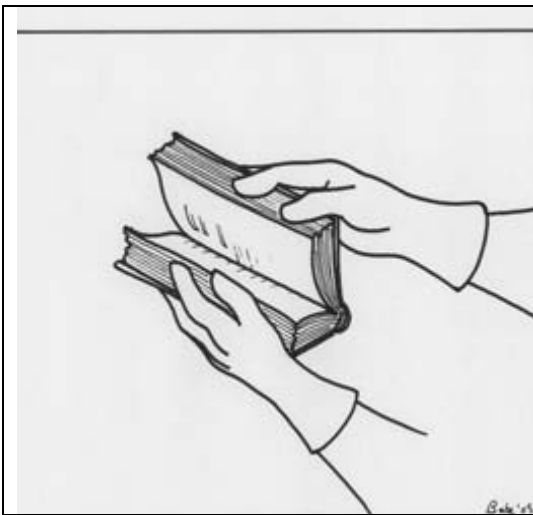
The box/cover may have to be returned to the custodian. Always enquire first.



Manuscripts should be placed on supportive book rests/cradles while being read.



Carefully place unopened manuscript on a book rest/cradle.



Begin by opening the centre pages...

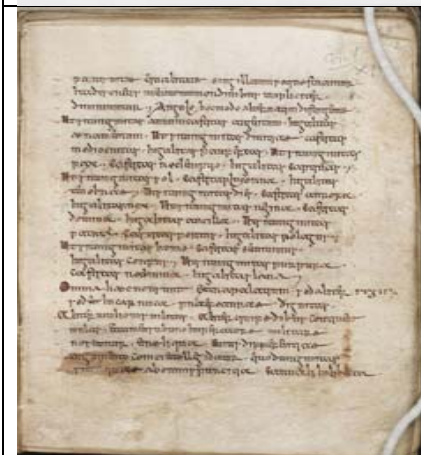


...then move to the pages you wish to study.



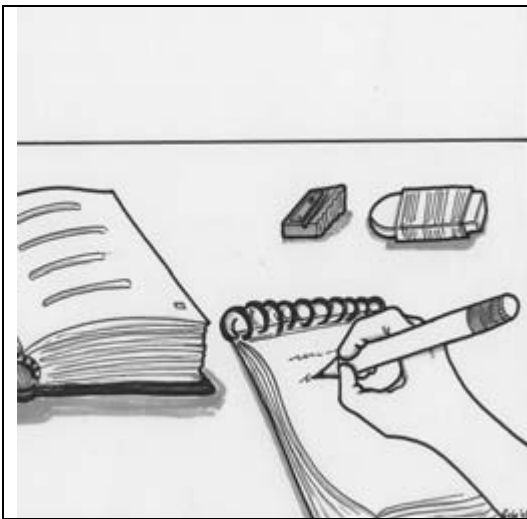
Manuscripts will open out to varying degrees, depending on how tightly they are bound.

Never force a manuscript open beyond what it will comfortably allow.

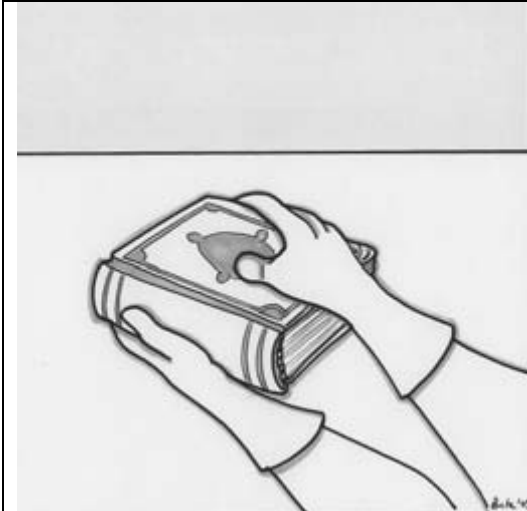


If the pages do not lie flat (and they rarely do), use a 'snake' (a long, cord-like paperweight) to hold down the corners.

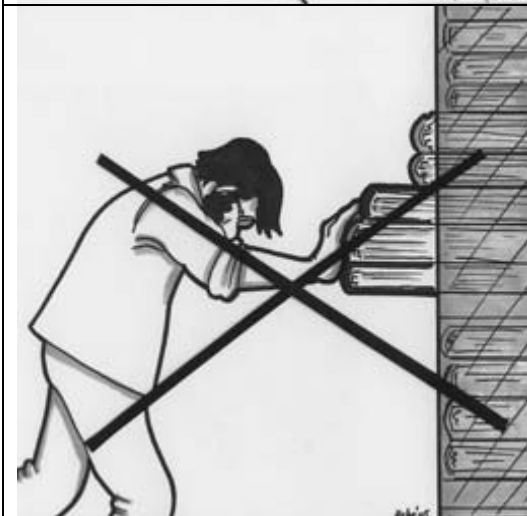
Ensure the snake does not touch the text/illuminations.



Notes should be made in pencil only. Some institutions require you to use acid-free paper when making notes. Always enquire beforehand.



Close the manuscript carefully; manuscripts can be damaged during both opening and closing.



Return the manuscript(s) to the custodian or replace them on the shelves yourself.

Do not force a manuscript into place on a shelf.

Further Reading:

G. R. Owen-Crocker (ed.), *Working with Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter, 2009), Chapter 1: 'Handling Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts'.