

Textual criticism

Textual criticism is a field of [textual scholarship](#). In most cases, textual criticism aims at producing a [critical edition](#) of a [text](#). This is done by comparing all relevant [versions](#) of the text and thus identifying and removing the “[errors](#)” – or alterations and modifications – that have changed the contents of the text during its [transmission](#) process. Hence, the aim of a textual critic is usually to reconstruct the original contents of the text. This is also called [constitutio textus](#).

The mechanics of textual criticism was known and applied already in the antiquity, but its principles were formalised as a scholarly set of rules only in the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly by German scholars Friedrich Wolf (1759-1824), Immanuel Bekker (1785-1871), [Karl Lachmann](#) (1793-1851), and especially [Paul Maas](#) (1880-1964) in his influential book *Textkritik* (1927). According to the latter, the process of textual criticism contains three stages: [receptio](#), [examinatio](#), and [emendatio](#). In practice, all available material is examined, after which the most trustworthy evidence is used to eliminate the changes to the [original](#). This process allows a scholar to reconstruct as original a state of the text as possible. The fruits of such study are normally given as a critical edition of the text, faithfully explaining and justifying the scholarly decisions of the editor. In most cases, a [stemma](#) is used as a tool for describing the relationships between the [witnesses](#) of the text.

The genealogical method encapsulated in Maas's principles has been faced with fierce criticism since the early 20th century, e.g. by [Joseph Bédier](#) (1864–1938), A. E. Housman (1859–1936), and [Henri Quentin](#) (1872–1935). Still, even the most recent computational methods of [stemmatology](#) share the basic principles of textual criticism and base their algorithms on the similarities and differences of the textual witnesses.

Textual criticism is sometimes called “lower criticism” to make a contrast to “higher criticism” that aims to establish the authorship, date and place of the original text – much based on the findings of textual criticism.

For fuller discussion of different approaches to editions, see [editions](#), [types of](#).

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In other languages

DE: Textkritik
FR: critique textuelle
IT: critica testuale

[TH](#)