A **minim** is a single, short vertical stroke like a the letter i, without the dot—the "minimal" element of any given script. In some scripts, many letters are made up of this one stroke, which can lead to "minim confusion." The word minim illustrates minim confusion nicely:

minim is the height of the top of one minim. (The equivalent term in typography is x-height.) The feet of minims sit on the **baseline**. Minim height is useful in talking about the proportions of a script.

An **ascender** is the part of a letter like b or d that sticks up above minim height.
A **descender** is the part of a letter like p or q that hangs down below the baseline.

tall ascenders and descenders in proportion to
minim height means quite a bit of space between
lines which is typical of caroline minuscule

large minim height in proportion to ascenders and
descenders means a dense page with less white space
which is typical of gothic textualis

abcdefghilmnopqrstu

A MAIVSCVLE SCRIPT IS ONE IN WHICH ALL OR ALMOST ALL THE LETTERS FIT BETWEEN TWO IMAGINARY LINES. ASCENDERS AND DESCENDERS ARE ABSENT OR VERY MINIMAL.

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ABCDEFGHILMNOPQRSTV ABCDEFGHILMNOPQRSTV

a minuscule script is one that has ascenders and descenders.

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Minuscules can be described as fitting roughly between four imaginary lines:
    the baseline on which the letters sit
    a line at minim height
    a line to which descenders descend
    a line to which ascenders ascend

(though in reality some ascenders and descenders will be shorter than others.)

abcdefghilmnopqrstu

abcdefghilmnopqrstu

Majuscule or minuscule? These scripts are conventionally classed as majuscules:

ABCDEFGHILMNOPQRSTU

abcdefghilmnopqrstu

majuscule ≠ upper case
minuscule ≠ lower case

In the Middle Ages, the letters from the ancient majuscule scripts began to be used as "display scripts" for headings, section divisions, litterae notabiliores ("more noticeable letters"), and eventually for capitalizing the beginnings of sentences and names, more or less the way we use them now. In this 9th-century manuscript, majuscule letters (drawn from the Roman majuscule scripts) are used to mark the beginnings of sentences, verses, and quotations in a text written in Caroline minuscule:
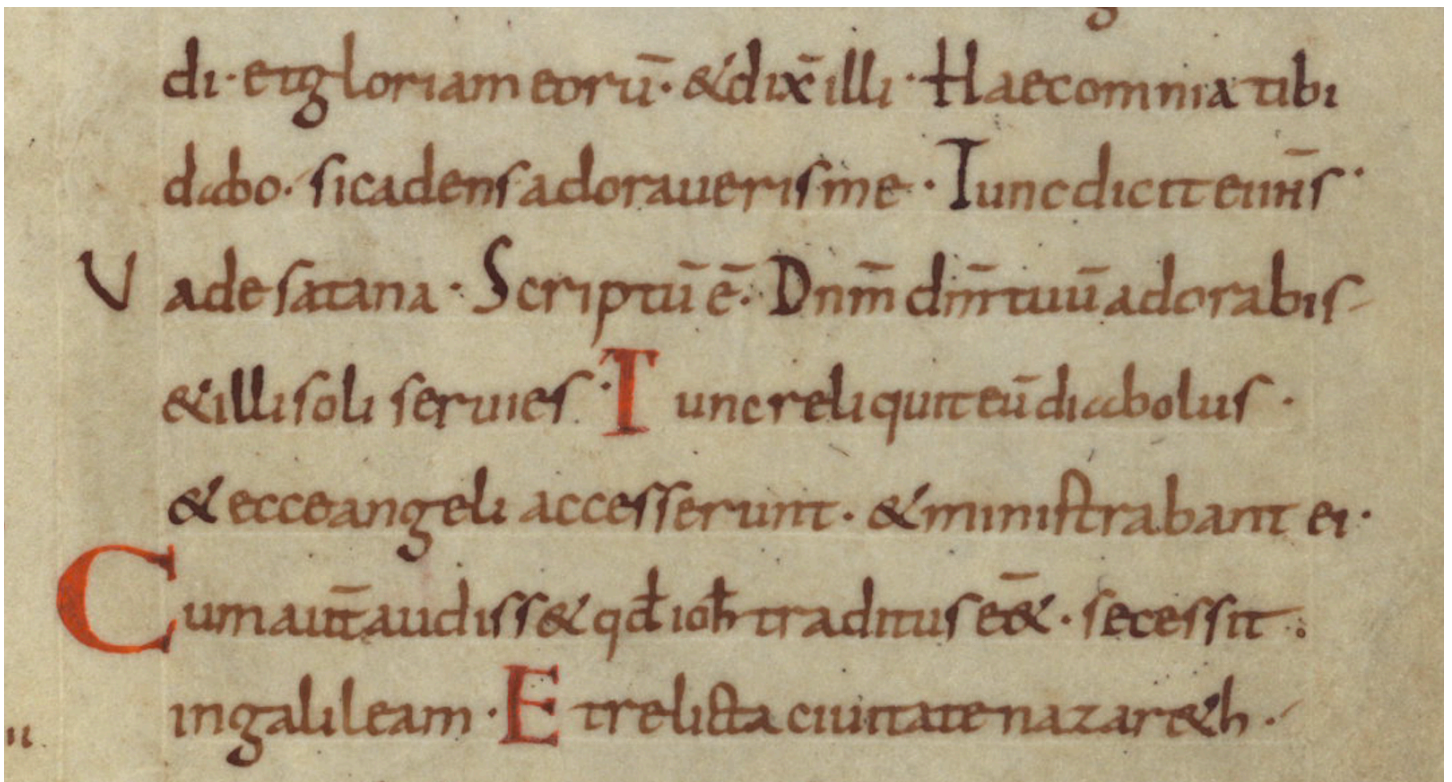

Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W.4, fol. 38r. Germany, 865-875.

By the time of the invention of printing, modern capitalization conventions were pretty much in place, so every font needed both majuscule and minuscule letterforms.

The "case" terminology comes from printing: the capital letters of a font would be kept in an **upper case** and the lower-case letters in a **lower case**—closer to the typesetter and easier to reach, since those letters were used a lot more often. (See illustration next page.)
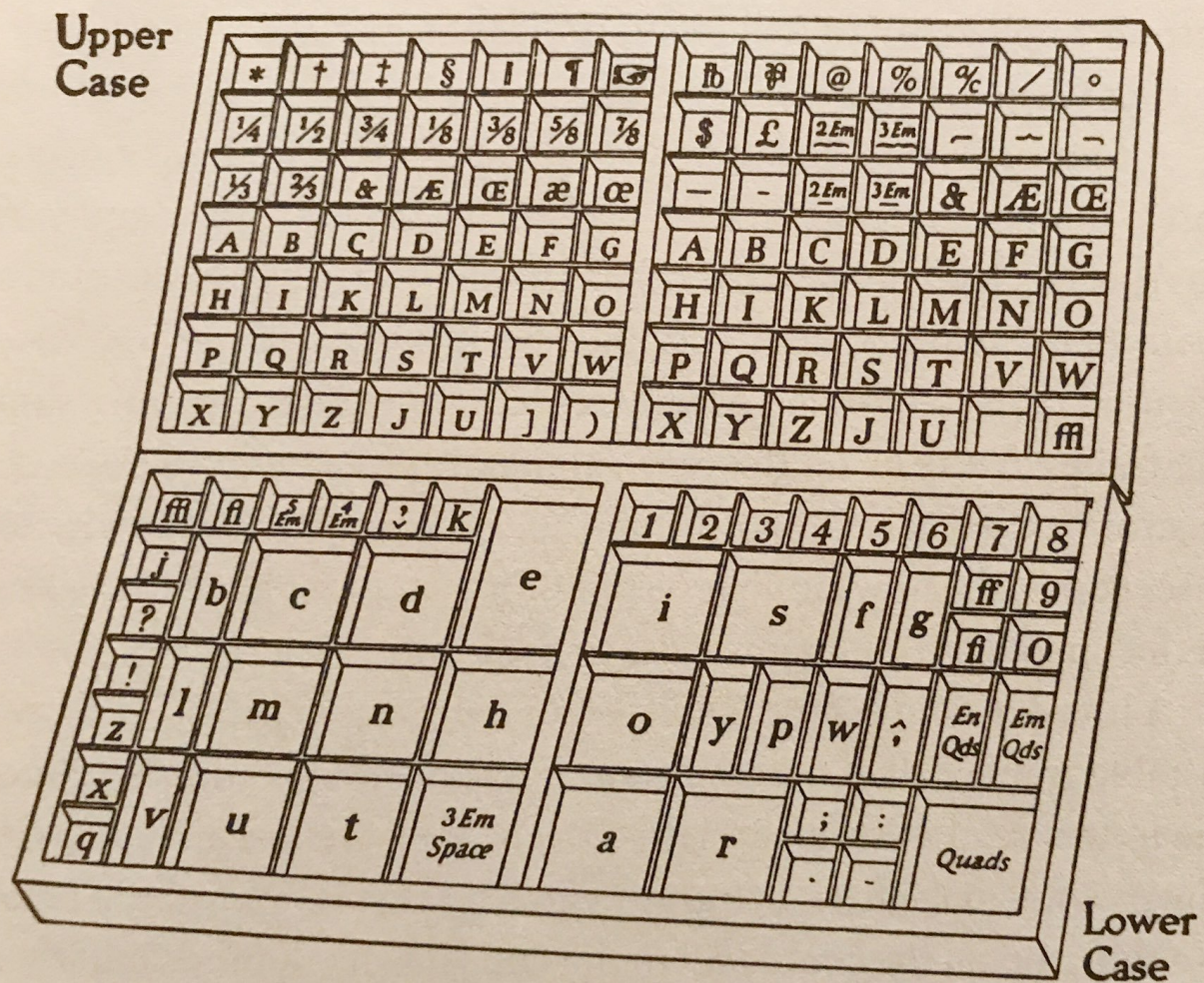
3.15 *Pair of printer's cases (drawn by Rudolph Růžička for D.B. Updike's* Printing Types).

Before printing, we can describe a **letterform** as **majuscule** (or capital) or **minuscule** but try to avoid using "upper case" and "lower case."

We describe a **whole script** as **majuscule** (fits between two lines) or **minuscule** (has ascenders that stick up and down/fits between four lines).

Minuscule scripts may be used with some majuscule letters for emphasis or decoration.

Majuscule scripts may contain letterforms we think of as "lower case."

Confused yet? We'll see how this applies in particular times and places as we go along.

Ductus: how many strokes the scribe uses to make each letter and in what order.

Some scripts are very elaborate and require several separate strokes for each letter:
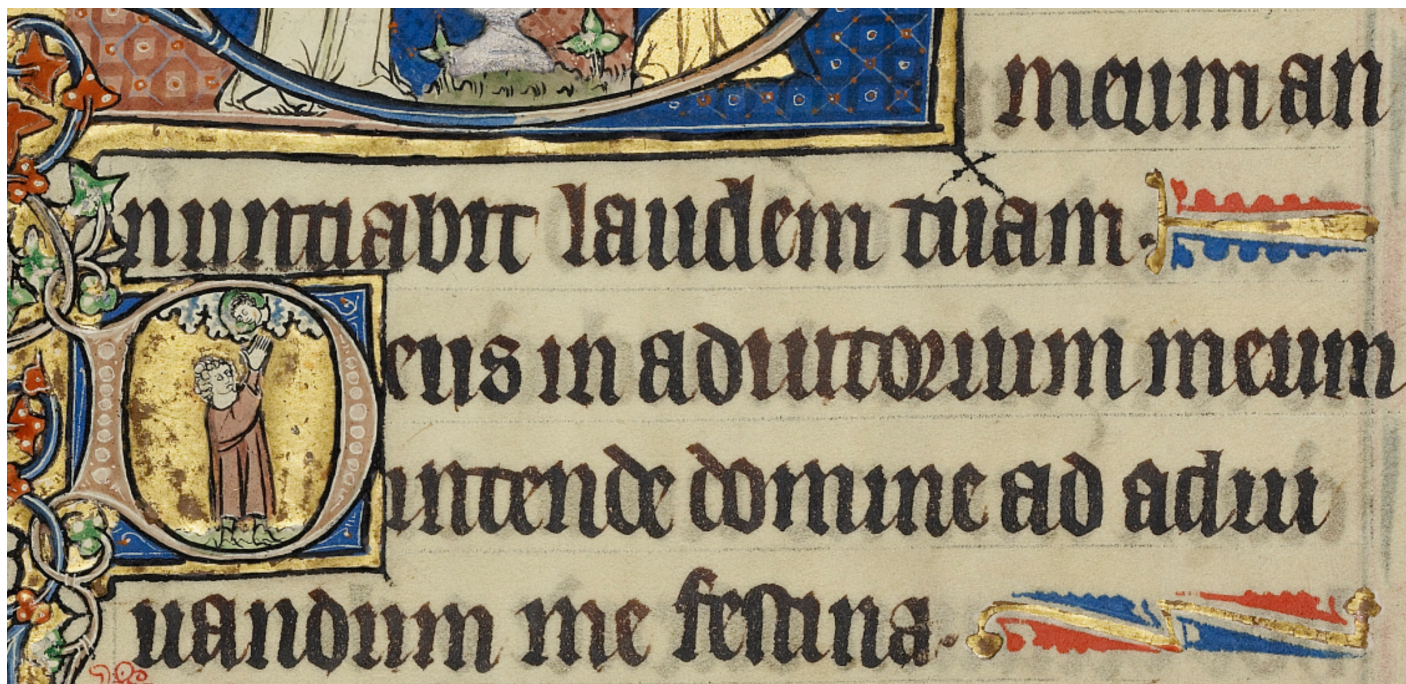
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig IX 3, ca. 1300

Some scripts are made with comparatively simple strokes and few lifts of the pen:
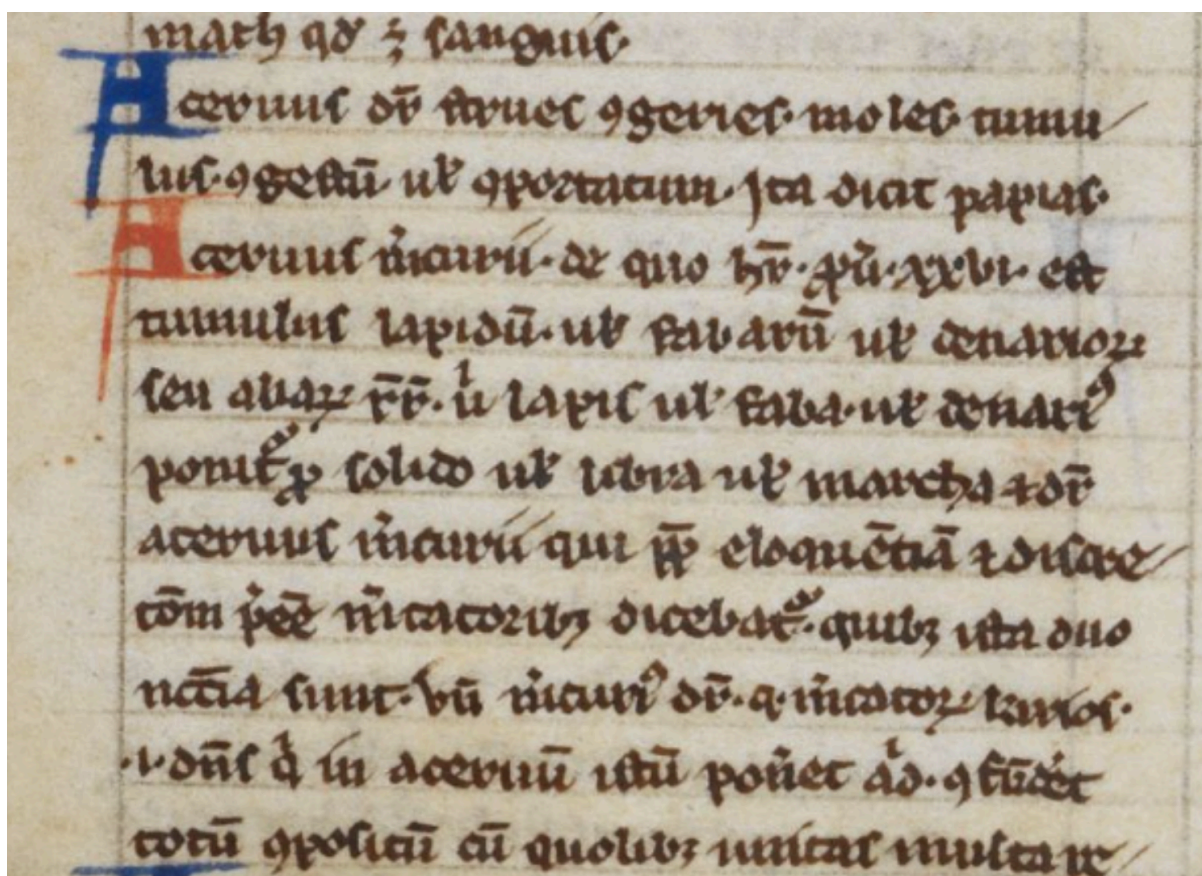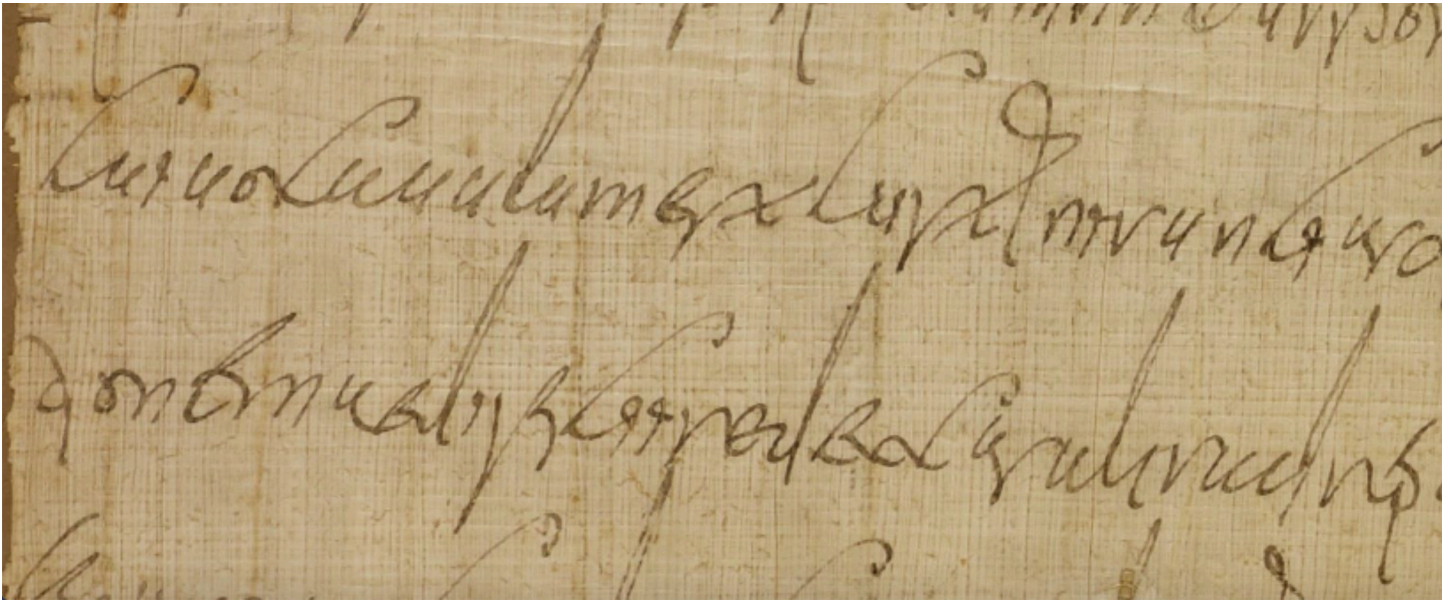

London, British Library, MS Harley 1687, late 13th century
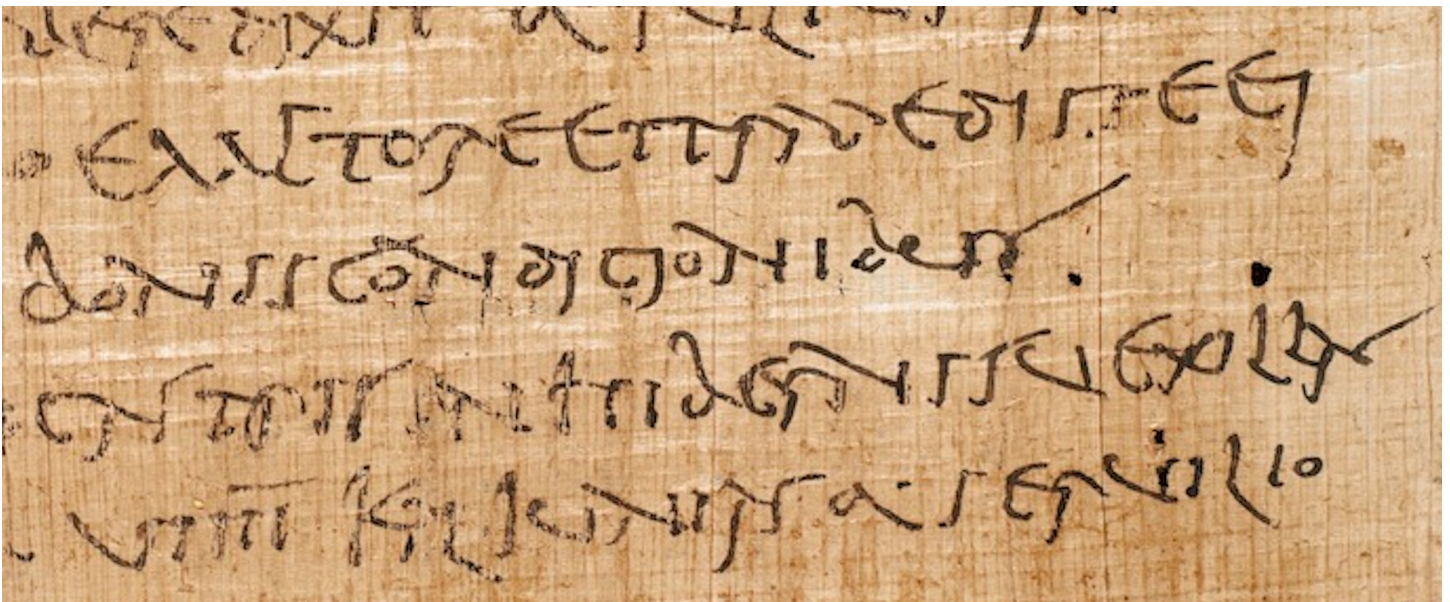
Cursive: A cursive script is one made with very few lifts of the pen.

Later Roman Cursive:

London, British Library, MS Add. 5412, AD 572, Ravenna

…though it has often been used in paleography to refer to scripts that are just messy, like Older Roman Cursive:

London, British Library, Papyrus 229, AD 166, Syria