The picture below shows a retouched image of a stone inscription from late fifth-century Athens, a wonderful brief sample of classical Attic spelled in the Ionic alphabet but with some features of Old Attic spelling retained, and likewise an excellent introduction to many aspects of Athenian democratic government. (Based on the Tafel 41 in J. Kirchner, Imagines inscriptionum atticarum; ein Bilderatlas epigraphischer denkmäler Attikas, Berlin 1935.)
This official Athenian decree began its life as a proposal (γνώµη) or motion in the Boule (Council of 500, βουλή) and then was brought to the next meeting of the Ecclesia or Demos (δῆμος), the Assembly of Athenian citizens, for discussion, possible amendment, and approval or disapproval. The Council consisted of ten groups of 50 Councilors (βουλευταί), one group from each of the ten Athenian tribes established when the democracy was founded about 100 years before the date of this decree. The government year (which extended from about the middle of our calendar year to the middle of the next) was divided into ten equal parts (prytanies, πρυτανείαι), during which each tribe took its turn being the executive subcommittee (πρυτάνεις, sing. πρυτάνις). Decrees normally have a formula at the beginning: this first records the approval of the resolution (ἔδοξε + dat.); then it provides information that allowed them and us to date action—the tribe that held the prytany (thus identifying which tenth of the civil year it was; in this decree the Antiochis tribe, Ἀντιοχῖς φυλή, was in charge); the name of the secretary (γραμματέας) at this time; the name of the Councilor or from that tribe who presided (by lot) at the relevant Assembly-meeting (ἐπιστάτης, ἐπιστατέω); the name of the eponymous archon of the year (ἀρχω in this formula means be the eponymous archon; we know that this Euktemon gave his name to the Athenian civil year that corresponds to what we would call 408/407 BCE); and finally the name of the one who moved the proposal in the Assembly.

Decrees usually have a formal structure with a whereas clause (ἐπειδή) setting forth the reasons for the action followed by infinitives with imperatival force (depending on the opening ἔδοξε). The Oiniades decree is of a type known as the “honorary decree” or “proxeny decree” because in it the Athenians declare a citizen of another community to be a public benefactor and an official liaison (πρόξενος) for any Athenian who visits his city. It is typical that this honor is recorded on stone and set up in a prominent place (here on the Acropolis), and that the honoree is also invited to be a guest at dinner in the town-hall (πρυτανεῖον). It is also typical that the honor is declared to be inheritable by Oiniades’ descendants (ἔκγονοι).

Another fascinating feature of this decree is that it records the process of amendment that occurred in the Assembly. Skiathos is a small island in the northwest Aegean Sea, just off the coast of the eastern tip of Thessaly. Apparently at some point the main community there moved and retained the name Skiathos, while the older town was renamed Palaiiskiathos (Old Skiathos): perhaps the old town was farther inland and higher up, for safety from piracy, and the new town was settled when the Aegean was more peaceful. The Council and Dieitrephes have mistakenly called Oiniades a citizen of Skiathos (the newer town), but Antichares rose in the Assembly to amend the resolution so that it would contain the correct designation (apparently Oiniades was proud of the distinction).

The decree is inscribed in a style known as stoichedon, meaning there is a precise grid into which the letters are placed and every line has the same number of letters (here 23). As usual in this period, there is no space between words and no punctuation; but note the empty space at the end of the dating formula, after HPXE (line 5), and another one before Antichares’ name (line 26), setting apart the amendment. The decree is preceded by the vocative θεοί, an invocation of the gods’ favor for the action taken by the citizens.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription</th>
<th>Interpretation according to modern conventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

1 The actions enjoined by the decree are expressed in infinitives. For the first two infinitives the subject is understood to be the Athenian state or its citizens (implied by Council and People in the opening phrase). Subsequent infinitives have subjects expressed, as usual, in the accusative: τὴν τε βουλὴν κτλ for ἐπιμελεῖσθαι, τὸν γραμματέα for ἀναγράφαται and καταθεῖαι. But the subjects of καλέσαι and μεταγράψαι are again not explicit.

2 The dative is sometimes used with ἔπαινεω instead of an accusative direct object.

3 The Council that is in office at any time (with ἀεὶ in a distributive sense) is a technical idiom to indicate that this duty is incumbent not just on the Council serving for the current year, but on any future year’s Council as well. A similar point is made in the subsequent phrase ὃς ἄν ἔκαστοτε, whoever may be the governor on each (future) occasion.

4 pólis is here used in a traditional local sense to mean the Acropolis.

5 The dative depends on an understood ἔδοξε.
be trained to

generations

reflection of pronunciation is the use of a single sigma in place of two in the phrase some speakers).

writing

preposition

genuine

ΕΣ

the spurious diphthong is involved

elsewhere we have

plain

or the Pronunciation tutorial screen epsilon).

epsilon, for eta, and

Compensatory lenghthening (spurious diphthong: see U1.7, or the Pronunciation tutorial screen omicron), and

for

ΧΣ

t

developed over a number of centuries and that characterize what most literary Greek texts look like when printed today

much different from the letter

α, µ, πρύτανειον, ξένια

Extra Reading: The Oiniades Decree (IG³ 110)

Note that what we print as iota subscript (in dative singular endings like βουλή, δήμω, or in subjunctive -ή) is an ordinary letter in the line. At the period of this inscription it was pronounced and therefore not omitted, but within a few generations inscriptions give evidence of its becoming silent, since it is often omitted, and later students and scribes had to be trained to include silent iota (still within the line of writing, until the middle Byzantine period).