

## **Evidence**

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Genealogical researchers should strive to achieve three goals: (1) collect information that is accurate and error-free, (2) convince others that you are right, and (3) make your results interesting to others.

### **Collect**

Collecting information that is accurate and free of error requires two things: use good sources, and evaluate what you find.

The best sources are primary and original. A primary source is one that was created near the time of the event and contained information from a reliable person present at the event. An original source is “the real thing” rather than a copy, transcription, abstract, description, or index entry. In the real world we cannot always find primary and original sources, but we do our best to come as close to those ideals as possible. The extra effort you spend to find primary original sources and use the evidence they contain will produce better information and more believable results.

Consider the person who informed the source you have discovered, whether that source is oral tradition or documentary. In the best primary sources the informant is a participant or witness, perceives accurately, has a reliable memory, and is an honest reporter. If the source is oral, you want to interview the originator of that story.

If the source is documentary, you want it to be informed by a person such as described above and who was, in addition, literate. You also want the document to be created by a similar person. The best documents are created soon after the events they describe. Find out if the document has been preserved and conveyed to you intact.

Link each piece of evidence you collect to its source. Keep an accurate and detailed description of any source you use, and its location. As you add each piece of evidence to your data, note the source of that item. This will allow you to evaluate information as your collection grows. Listing your sources with information you pass on to others will allow those people to form accurate opinions about the quality of your work and the credibility of your results.

### **Evaluate**

The first step to evaluating evidence is to evaluate the source. Is it primary, secondary, tertiary, or worse? Is it an original, a clear copy, a poor copy, a transcription, or worse?

The second step is to evaluate the person who informed the source and the one who recorded the evidence. Do those people meet the standards above, or are they slightly imperfect, or are they significantly flawed, or are they unreliable?

The next step is to consider the source’s content; such as names, dates, places, descriptions of background and context, and manner of describing those items. Ask these three important questions:

1. Does the information make sense, is it reasonable, and is it believable?
2. Is the information internally consistent? That is, is each fact in the document consistent with all other facts in the document?
3. Is the information externally consistent? That is, are all the facts given in the document consistent with facts already known to be true from other sources?

## **Beware**

Before you evaluate and use information in a source, ask yourself if that source really is talking about the person who interests you. Having the same name is not sufficient; enough other facts must match to convince you that the subject of the source is the target of your search. When enough facts appear to match, check for uniqueness. (For example: Suppose you are looking for Henry S. Trout in Virginia shortly before the Civil War, and suppose you find something that seems to describe him. Check the 1860 Virginia census for Henry Trout; you will find two of them, of about the same age. How do you know which one your document describes? You might know, or you might have to do additional research to determine who the source describes.) You cannot be confident that the subject person is the target person until (1) enough facts match and (2) you have resolved any question about uniqueness.

Beware of possible errors in oral traditions; participant perceptions can be inaccurate or prejudiced, memories can fade, and retelling can be less than perfectly faithful to the original story.

Beware of possible errors in documents, because informants' perceptions and memories can err and because recorders can err.

Be suspicious of published family trees, especially if they don't show an extensive list of good sources. You don't know how careful the creators of those trees were. (On the internet you can find an ancestral tree for George Washington, showing him to be descended from Thor, Odin, and "Mrs. Odin". You can also find a tree that describes a man in detail, describes his father in detail, and then lists the first man as the father of his father.)

If you are not working with primary original documents, consider what you have to be clues that will help you find original primary documents. Consider each fact in a published

genealogy that is not rigorously documented to be unsubstantiated rumor, and search for original primary materials that could confirm or refute each such fact.

If you find an interesting report that shows a list of sources, check up on a sample of those sources in order to form an opinion about the quality of the report. When you check some of those sources, you might find that they cite other sources for their information; trace that line of evidence back to original primary documents. If you can verify a significant sample of the report's sources (not just one or two) for a time period, then you probably can have more confidence that the report's content for that same time period is credible. Sometimes tracing such a line of evidence reveals much more information that you value but which earlier writers did not think important for their purposes.

## **Document**

Document your research as you go. The best habit is to make a record of the source before you use it. Identify the source so well that someone else can understand what it was and form an opinion of its adequacy. Specify where you found the source so that someone else can find it directly. If you keep a copy of the source, tell where the copy is in your files.

After you make a record of the source, add its evidence to your information and link that information to its source. Some people link each fact that came from the source to that source note. Other people link the source to each person it describes, but not to each fact.

## **Conform**

As you collect, use, and report evidence you gather; conform to the Genealogical Proof Standard, which was created by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. Following the

GPS will give you better information and more credibility. The elements of the GPS are:

1. Search: “We conduct a reasonably exhaustive search in reliable sources for all information that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question.” [2] Think, “*Every possible record*”.
2. Citation: “We collect and include in our compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source or sources of each item of information.” [2] (For samples and guidelines, do an internet search for “citing genealogy sources” without the quotes.) Think, “*Can somebody else go to this?*”.
3. Analysis: “We analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence. [2] Think, “*Original, primary, direct, clear and unambiguous, consistent*”.
4. Resolution: “We resolve any conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question.” [2] The BCG says, “If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible.” [3] Think, “*Preponderance of reliable sources*”.
5. Conclusion: “We arrive at a soundly reasoned and coherently written conclusion.” [2] Think, “*Sequential logic. Prove your case*”.

### Write

“Learning By Writing” is a powerful process. There are many benefits to writing a detailed description of your research methods, what you found, and what you concluded. Learning By Writing helps you clarify and justify your thinking. Reading and polishing the report until it is “just right” may point out and help you repair omissions in your data or reasoning. The final product will clarify your work to other people and help you convince them that your conclusions are correct.

You don’t always need to create a written report, but you probably should do so after completing a large or difficult research project. If you write a report, you should add it to your document files; it may be very valuable later.

In your written report you should:

1. Specify the research question or problem.
2. Describe the background situation and what you knew before you started the project.
3. Describe how you approached the issue, what sources you searched, and what you found in each source.
4. Explain how you organized and analyzed the data, and what conclusions those efforts led to.
5. Throughout the report, cite your sources.
6. Probably include copies of important documents, maps, photos, and so on.

### Share

If you want to share your results with others, you need to pique and then keep their interest so they will read and enjoy everything you offer them.

Limit your subject and content. Telling everything about everybody will be too dense for people to read and understand.

Prepare the text and exhibits. Remember that you are writing for you audience; not yourself. Read and revise your drafts until you are convinced that you have covered everything you intended to cover, have written clearly, and have included all suitable exhibits. Use a spell checker for sure and a grammar checker if you have one. When you think you have a good, final product, ask someone to read it for you and offer suggestions and ask questions about the material.

Choose presentation media (paper, CD, web site, etc.) and distribution methods that will best show off your results and make them available to your intended audience.