
Genealogical Proof for the Everyday Genealogist

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DESCRIPTION

As a researcher, how do you know if the facts you've uncovered are correct? How do you avoid attaching somebody else's ancestors to your family tree? This introduction to the Genealogical Proof Standard will get your research moving in the right direction from the beginning and help you avoid errors, frustration, and brick walls.

OUR JOB AS GENEALOGISTS

Whether we consider ourselves hobbyists or professionals, our job is to come to reliable conclusions about the relationships and identities of the people we are researching. These conclusions must be based on solid evidence we uncover in our research. Without evidence we have only speculation and guesswork, and we can't come to a reliable or "proven" conclusion.

THE GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD—NOT JUST FOR THE "PROS"

The Genealogical Proof Standard exists for all of us who want to produce work we and others can rely on for accuracy. None of us wants to spend hours working on someone else's ancestors who've been grafted onto our family tree by mistake. We can avoid errors—and avoid creating our own brick walls—if we understand the genealogical proof standard and use it as our guide to doing sound research that produces accurate, reliable results.

Genealogists who say, "But I'm just doing this for myself," miss the point. All of us need to do accurate research and to have a guide to let us know we're on track. We need to leave accurate, reliable family history for the genealogists who come after us. When we share our research with our families, we want to be sure we're telling them the truth about our ancestors. Any research that's worth doing is worth doing right.

THE GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD—FIVE STEPS¹

1. Reasonably exhaustive research.
2. Complete and accurate source citations.
3. Analysis and correlation of sources, information, and evidence.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards: Second Edition* (Nashville: Ancestry, 2019), pp. 1-3.

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4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
5. A written conclusion based on the strongest available evidence.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS²

A systematic approach to research uses a process that begins with a **research question**—sometimes also called a research objective—about a particular person, relationship, or event. This narrows the focus of our research and allows us to consider what sources might be most helpful in answering the question.

Next, we list those sources that we've decided would be most likely to provide the answer to our research question and **gather evidence** from them. Because we have a focused research question and a research plan, our time spent gathering evidence is used efficiently.

Then we **reason from the evidence** by analyzing and correlating what we have found and resolving any inconsistencies or conflicts we uncover. Resolving conflicting evidence isn't just a matter of picking the answer with the most documents supporting it. We analyze our findings to determine which answer is most likely to be right, based on a number of factors.

Once any inconsistencies and conflicts are resolved, what remains is a **conclusion** supported by evidence.

Once we've reached this point, we **explain our conclusions** in writing and include our sources. This allows us—and others—to build on our work, confident in the knowledge that further research has a firm and reliable foundation.

Depending upon the difficulty or complexity of our research question, this process may occur pretty quickly or may take a great deal of time and effort.

SOURCES, INFORMATION, AND EVIDENCE³

When we analyze the results of our research for reliability and accuracy, we look at what we've gathered on three levels.

² Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Nashville: Ancestry, 2014), Chapter 3. Also Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013), p. 5. Also Elizabeth Shown Mills, Ed., *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians* (Baltimore: Genealogy Publishing Co., 2001), Chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17.

³ Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013), Chapter 2. Also Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 3rd edition (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015), Chapter 1.

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First we look at the quality of the **source**—the documents, books, websites, certificates, wills—any of the many containers of information we have consulted in our research. Is the source an **original record**, created at the time of the event or soon after? Is it a **derivative record**, created from previous records? Is it an **authored narrative**, created from a number of different sources? As researchers we should prefer original records, as they are the most likely (though not guaranteed) to be free from error.

Next we look at the quality of the **information** contained in the source, and we judge it by the informant's level of participation in an event or knowledge of an event. Is it **primary information** reported by an eyewitness? Is it **secondary information** reported by someone who learned it from someone else? Or is the informant **undetermined**—we can't identify who supplied the information? As researchers we would prefer primary information, as it is the most likely (though not guaranteed) to be free from error.

Finally we look at the quality of **evidence** supplied by the information from our sources. We judge evidence in terms of how well it answers or helps to answer our research question. Is it **direct evidence** that provides an answer to the research question? Is it **indirect evidence** that only provides an answer to the research question when combined with other evidence? Or is it **negative evidence** that answers a research question by its absence? Any of these types of evidence may give us an accurate and reliable answer to our research question.

REASONABLY EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH⁴

As good researchers, we may often find ourselves wondering “how much is enough” to answer our research question. In *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, Thomas W. Jones offers six criteria to help us judge whether our research has been reasonably exhaustive⁵:

1. At least two independently-created evidence items in agreement.
2. All sources competent genealogists would examine.
3. Some primary information.
4. Some original records.
5. Relevant authored works, derivative works, and secondary information replaced by findable corresponding originals and primary information.
6. All findable sources that relevant sources and indexes suggest.

⁴ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Nashville: Ancestry, 2014), pp. 1-2.

⁵ Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013), Chapter 3. (Used with permission.)

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A note about independently-created evidence items: records are independently created when the informants for those records are not the same.

RESOURCES

Many excellent resources exist for further study and mastery of the Genealogical Proof Standard. It takes some practice and perhaps a change in our mindset about research to put the GPS to work for us, but the results in efficiency and effectiveness are worth it.

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